か-16-26

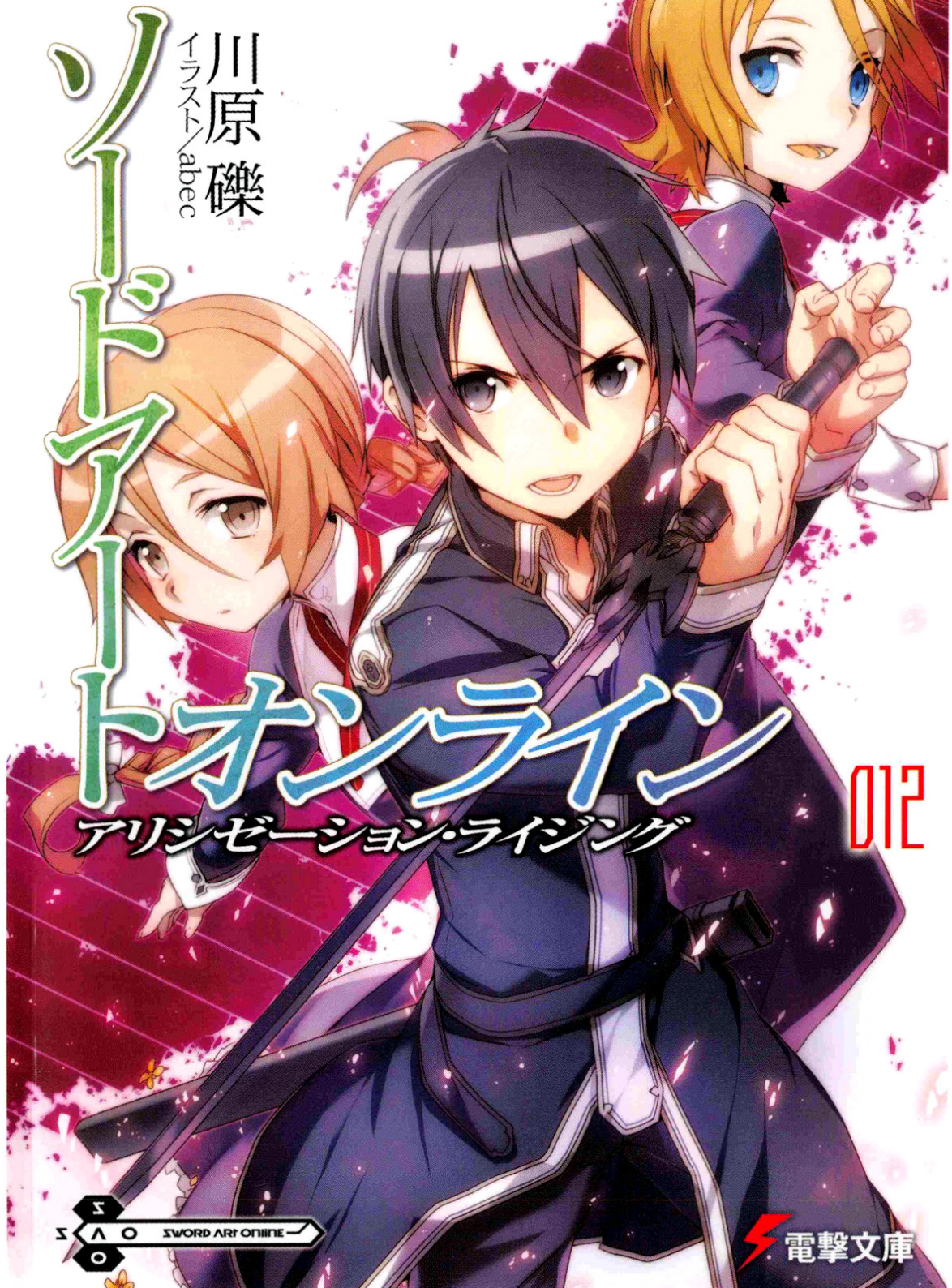
ソードアート・オンライン12

アリシゼーション・ライジング

幼少の頃から追い求めた少女・アリスとついに再会したユージオ。しかし、そのアリスに、昔の――≪ルーリッドの村≫時代の面影は無かった。禁忌目録を破ったキリトとユージオを捕らえるために来たというアリス。彼女に幼少の記憶は無く、そして自身を≪整合騎士≫と名乗った。

≪公理教会≫の象徴≪セントラル・カセドラル≫の地下牢に繋がれたキリトとユージオだが、キリトの機転でどうにか脱出を果たす。キリトが≪外部≫の人間であることを見抜いた謎の少女・カーディナルの助けをかり、二人はアリスを≪本当の姿≫に戻すため、塔の頂点を目指す!

しかし、≪シンセサイズの秘儀≫により生まれた最強の戦士たちが、キリトとユージオの前に立ちはだかる――!



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川原 礫（かわはら れき）

この近況を書いている日は三月にしてはとても暖かくて、「今日は最高の季節の最高の気象設定だなー」などと思っていたらいきなり砂嵐が襲ってきて外が黄色くなりました。現実世界のカーディナルシステムもなかなか皮肉が効いてますね！

【電撃文庫作品】

アクセル・ワールド 1～13
ソードアート・オンライン 1～12
ソードアート・オンライン プログレッシブ1

イラスト：abec

あべし？

SWORD ART ONLINE
ALICIZATION RISING
012

REKI KAWAHARA
ABEC
BEE-PEE

SWORD ART ONLINE

「こうして≪熾焔弓≫の炎を浴びるのは実に二年振りだ。
なるほど、騎士エルドリエ・サーティワンと
渡り合うだけの技はあるようだな、咎人どもよ」

デュソルバート・シンセシス・セブン§ ≪熾焔弓≫を操る整合騎士

「ユージオ、初撃を
どうにかして止めるから、
お前が斬り込むんだ」

キリト§ 謎の≪仮想世界≫アンダーワールドに迷い込んだ少年。ここから抜け出すため≪システムコンソール≫を探している

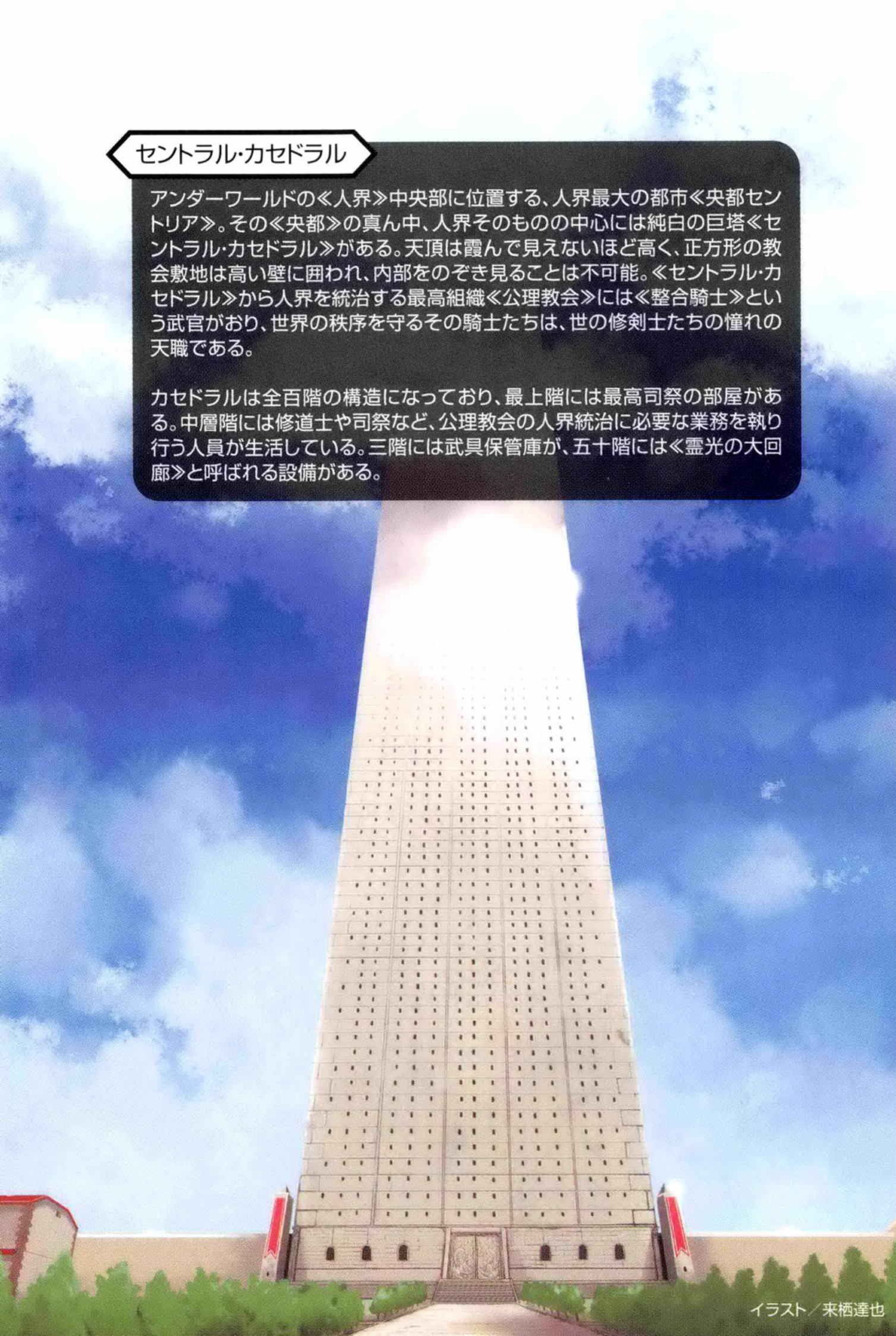
「――解った」

ユージオ§ キリトがこの世界で出会った最初の住人。キリトと共に≪北セントリア修剣学院≫の≪上級修剣士≫となった

うおおおお!!
「さらばだ、若く愚かな咎人。
天穿剣に秘められた光よ、今こそ枷から放たれよ!!
――リリース・リコレクション!!」
ファナティオ・シンセシス・ツー
《天穿剣》を司る
整合騎士副騎士長

「――いいでしょう、お前たちの邪心が
いかほどのものか、その剣筋で試すこととします」
―アリス・シンセシス・サーティ§ ≪金木犀の剣≫を操る整合騎士

「修剣士キリト、改めて騎士アリス殿に
尋常なる剣の立ち合いを所望する!」



セントラル・カセドラル

アンダーワールドの≪人界≫中央部に位置する、人界最大の都市≪央都セントリア≫。その≪央都≫の真ん中、人界そのものの中心には純白の巨塔≪セントラル・カセドラル≫がある。天頂は霞んで見えないほど高く、正方形の教会敷地は高い壁に囲われ、内部をのぞき見ることは不可能。≪セントラル・カセドラル≫から人界を統治する最高組織≪公理教会≫には≪整合騎士≫という武官がおり、世界の秩序を守るその騎士たちは、世の修剣士たちの憧れの天職である。

カセドラルは全百階の構造になっており、最上階には最高司祭の部屋がある。中層階には修道士や司祭など、公理教会の人界統治に必要な業務を執り行う人員が生活している。三階には武具保管庫が、五十階には≪霊光の大回廊≫と呼ばれる設備がある。

イラスト／来栖達也

Chapter 7 - The Two Supervisors (5th Month of Human World Calendar 380)

Part 1

I, Kirigaya Kazuto, had logged out from the VRMMO-RPG, «Sword Art Online», on the 7th of November, 2024.

It was mid-December when I returned to my home in Kawagoe City, Saitama Prefecture, following my rehabilitation period. I had turned sixteen a couple of months ago, but since I had been challenging the fiftieth floor of Aincrad while my previous peers in the same grade were challenging the high school entrance examinations, there was obviously no school that I could attend.

Fortunately—though I hesitate to call it such, I received a certificate of graduation from the middle school I've only half finished, so the normal route would be to spend my time at a preparation school until I can take the examinations next year, postponed by a year. However, here, the country proposed an unimaginable relief measure.

Among the roughly six thousand players who returned alive from imprisonment in SAO, the middle-and-high schoolers numbered over five hundred. It was decided that a school for them all would be established in Nishitokyo, Tokyo, from the April of 2025 with no need for entrance examinations or school fees, and the graduates would be granted qualifications to take entrance examinations for universities.

The building used was that of a metropolitan high school, abandoned the previous year and awaiting its demolition. Re-employed teachers who had retired from old age, serving part-time, largely made up the teaching staff. It was classified as a National Vocational School under the School Education Law.

That unexpected level of sympathy, even as a safety net, certainly did cause a tinge of unease, but I decided to enter after consulting Asuna and of course, my family. I have never regretted it even once. Designing and creating various devices with friends in my Mechatronics course was extremely fun and I could meet Asuna, Lisbeth, Silica, and the rest everyday. I could still claim it was a fulfilling schooling life even after taking away points for the compulsory weekly counseling session.

However, I was unable to attend that school to the end as well.

It was a year and two months after I entered, on the 6th of June, 2026. For some unknown reason, I gained consciousness in another world, «Underworld». Waking in the forest near Rulid Village, on the northern edge of the Human World, I had cried out with all I could muster to the staff from the venture company that should have been developing and managing this world, Rath, but no reply came back.

Reluctantly, I aimed for the place most likely to have a console capable of contacting the outside world from here—the center of the Human World, Central Centoria, or what was at its core, the Axiom Church's towering Central Cathedral, and had set out on a journey from Rulid with the partner I had met in this world, Eugeo.

I had somehow reached Centoria after spending an Underworld calendar year's worth of time, but I hadn't simply continued on and entered the Cathedral. The gate of the Axiom Church was always firmly shut, with access restricted to the champion swordsman of the «Four Empires Unity Tournament» held in spring each year.

Hence, Eugeo and I, both aiming for the Cathedral, had first enrolled in the «Imperial Sword Mastery Academy» to earn the qualification required to enter the tournament, though we had differing goals. Its curriculum would be impossible in the real world, comprising mainly of swordsmanship and magic (or to be accurate, sacred arts) and it was also my first time living in a dormitory; those were my circumstances, but I still got used to my life at the Sword Mastery Academy... no, I could even say that I enjoyed my time there.

However, a year and a month after my enrollment, in the fifth month of year 380 on the Human World Calendar, once again, an incident occurred that caused an inevitable cessation to my schooling life. A couple of upper class male nobles tried to toy with both my «valet trainee»; a novice trainee by the name of Ronye, and Eugeo's valet; Tiezé, through a cunning trap.

Eugeo, who happened to be at the scene, broke through the absolute restriction of «disobeying the law» and drew his sword. Just as he slashed away the left arm of the upper class noble, Humbert, with an all-out attack, I finally finished running there, and exchanged sword blows with the upper class noble, Raios, severing both of his hands.

Although those were major wounds, his life would have been in no danger if the blood flow was immediately sealed and the wounds treated with sacred arts, but then, a strange phenomenon occurred. Pressed to choose

between the highest law in the Human World, the «Taboo Index», and his own will, he cried out in an alien voice as he died... no, as he halted all action.

The academy had expelled Eugeo and myself and an «integrity knight», dispatched by the Axiom Church, had incarcerated us in the jail under the cathedral. Undiscouraged by my third time «leaving a school midway», we immediately broke out and wandered through the rose garden in the grounds; searching for an entrance to the cathedral building itself, during which we became embroiled in a battle against a new integrity knight, and the one who saved us as we desperately ran everywhere was—

A mysterious, young girl who named herself «Cardinal».

Cardinal, who lived in a humongous library room existing in a hermetic space, made Eugeo, drenched as he fell into a fountain during the battle, go to the bathroom and in that time, revealed a truth I found astonishing.

That this world, Underworld, was a simulation of a civilization that had undergone through at least four hundred and fifty years internally.

That the highest minister of the Axiom Church, ruling over the world, was once a beautiful young girl named Quinella; no different from a normal inhabitant.

The girl who had devoted herself to the usage of sacred arts, or in other words system commands, pursued power to such an extent that she reached a forbidden incantation—a command to read the «entire command list». There was no other means for a single subject within the simulation to be promoted to a supervisor.

With her absolute authority to rule, Quinella was likely looking down on this world from the top floor of the Central Cathedral now. Was that look directed towards Eugeo and I, lost in the sacred garden, as well...?

Cardinal, sitting on the opposite side of the round table, turned a derisive smile onto me as she looked at me shivering from a sudden chill. Taking a sip of tea from the cup atop the table, she lifted her small spectacles.

"It is far too early to shudder in fear."

I suppressed the chills and somehow replied to her calm words.

"Aah... sorry, please go on."

Lifting my cup, I sipped at the tea that tasted similiar to coffee in the real world.

Cardinal leaned her small frame against the chair's back support and began talking once more, in a tranquil tone.

"Going back two hundred and seventy years into the past... Quinella successfully called out the entire command list, firstly raising her own authority level to the maximum; one capable of directly interfering with the Cardinal System controlling the world. Next, she endowed herself with all of the authorities that only the Cardinal System possessed. Terrain and building manipulation, item generation, even the manipulation of the durability belonging to dynamic units, including humans... or in other words; the manipulation of Life..."

"Manipulation of... Life. Then that means, in other words, her life span..."

The youthful sage gave a composed nod at my timid query.

"It meant she could transcend it. Altered into a full supervisor, Quinella's first course of action was to completely restore her own Life, which was eighty years and on the verge of vanishing. Continuing on, she halted its natural degeneration. Furthermore, she recovered her youthful outward appearance. Quinella's rapture at regaining the scintillating beauty from her late teens was likely... something beyond the imagination of someone like you; young, and not to mention, male, however..."

"Well... I do understand that would be one of the ultimate dreams for women."

Cardinal gave a callous snort when I meekly replied.

"Even I, who possess no human emotion, could claim to be thankful for this static external form. I do have a tremendous desire to grow another five or six years worth, but... —Nonetheless, having finally completely satisfied all of the desires that spurred her on made Quinella exceptionally exhilarated. After all, she now obtained the power to freely manipulate the vast Human World and eternal beauty as well. She was in ecstasy... the zenith of ecstasy. Enough to shed a sheer, sliver of her sanity..."

Cardinal's large eyes suddenly narrowed deep beyond her spectacles. As though she was mocking mankind's foolishness—or perhaps, pitying them.

"—It would have been for the best if she was satisfied there and then. However, it turned out there truly was no bottom to the gaping hole within Quinella's heart. That one knew not what was enough... she could not even permit the existence of one who held equal authority to hers."

"Was that... in reference to the Cardinal System itself?"

"Indeed. She also tried to remove a bundle of programs that held no awareness. However... even with her proficiency at the sacred arts, Quinella in the end is nothing more than an Underworld inhabitant, unconnected to the scientific civilization. There was no possibility of her understanding the complex syntax of the commands from the supervisor-level authority in a single night. Quinella recklessly tried to decipher the reference written for the sake of Rath's engineers... and she erred. A mere, single, and enormous mistake. She thought of taking the whole of Cardinal within herself, devised an extensive command, and then recited it. As a result..."

The girl spoke with a murmur much like a sigh.

"...Quinella ended up burning the primary instructions assigned to the Cardinal System into her own fluct light as a read-only behavioral principle. She intended to steal the authority level alone but ended up fusing Cardinal with her own soul!"

"...What... what was that...?"

My comprehension unable to catch up, I blankly muttered.

"Cardinal's primary instructions... to be specific, what would those be...?"

"—«Preservation of regularity». That is the purpose behind Cardinal's existence. You, too, ought to understand if you have came into contact with a world of a similar system. Cardinal is always observing the actions of «players» like the lot of you. And the very moment any phenomenon is detected that threatens to throw the world's balance into disarray, it rectifies that without a shred of mercy."

"Aah... that's true. I spent day and night scheming to outwit Cardinal, but it filled in any loopholes immediately after I found them..."

When I muttered while recalling how safe yet effective farming spots were entirely dealt with during my SAO days, Cardinal made a conceited-seeming smile once again. It was only when she had that face

on that the atmosphere of a sage around her turned into that of an innocent, young girl of her apparent age.

"That goes without saying, no matter how many greenhorns get together, they won't be able to outwit Cardinal. ...However, Quinella went far beyond even that for her preservation of regularity. Writing the instructions onto her fluct light, or in other words, her soul, caused Quinella to faint and she awoke only after an entire day of sleep. By then, she could have been considered to no longer be human in various ways. She would not age, she would neither drink water nor eat bread... her only desire was for the Human World she ruled over to eternally remain the same..."

"Eternally... remain the same..."

While repeating her words in a murmur, I pondered.

Aside from the general purpose AI; the Cardinal System, all of the supervisors for the various existing VRMMOs would probably wish for their game worlds to continue on. They would regulate the balance between the currency, as well as the item and monster spawns, in a bid to preserve regularity. However, there was a single factor even supervisors possessing godlike power could not control. Players.

Could that not be said to apply to this Underworld as well...?

And, as if she saw through my thoughts, Cardinal gave a slight nod and resumed her explanation.

"Formerly, what the Cardinal System controlled were animals, vegetation, terrain, and weather; that is objects and effects... in other words, it acted as a foundation for the world, with no interference in the actions of its inhabitants, the artificial fluct lights. ...However, Quinella was different. She even thought about restraining the humans' lives for all of eternity."

"Restraining... in other words, making everybody repeat the same routine day after day without anything new... was that what you meant...?"

"Nn... well, that is essentially it. Allow me to continue... fused with the Cardinal System, Quinella first amended her own name. To the... highest minister of the Axiom Church, Administrator."

I cut in once again the instant I heard that.

"H-He said that name too. That Integrity Knight Eldrie Synthesis... erm..."

"Thirty-one, I'm sure."

"Right, that's it. I believe he said he received an invitation from the highest minister, Administrator-sama, and then came down to the land from the Celestial World or something like that. ...I see, so he was referring to Quinella... How should I say this, she sure took up an amazing name, huh."

To me, the English word, «Administrator», was one that I associated with a supervisor-level account rather than its definition of an actual supervisor. It was unconfirmed which meaning Quinella had in mind when she named herself so, though.

Cardinal made a faint, wry smile at my remark and nodded.

"It wasn't at the level of naming herself as the god of this world, but it could be said to be much like how she would handle things... —Regardless, now the supervisor in both name and reality, Quinella first proclaimed a single edict. For the four great nobles of that age to ascend to the position of emperors, splitting the Human World into four empires: north, east, south, and west. Kirito, you have seen the walls that divided Central Centoria into four, haven't you?"

It was my turn to nod this time as the one being asked.

The Sword Mastery Academy I lived at was in the 5th District of Norlangarth North Empire's capital, Northern Centoria. The white stone barrier could always be seen from the dormitory's windows, far taller than any other structure within the city. Beyond those walls called the «immortal walls» were the capitals of the other empires; a great cause for surprise when I first found out.

"The masses did not quarry marble and pile them up over years for those walls. Quinella... no, Administrator made them appear in an instant with her godlike might."

"...In-Instantly!? Those walls!? That's way beyond the limits of sacred arts... the people of Centoria back then must have been shaking in their boots...?"

"Naturally, that was her aim. To show the masses the power of the Cardinal System and to instill a tremendous awe into them. With that psychological barrier and the «immortal walls», a physical barrier, she attempted to restrict the masses' movements and interactions. For the

sake of letting the Axiom Church seize the transmission channels for news, so as to control the masses' hearts. She wished for the people to remain devoted believers of the church for eternity, staying ignorant and naive... —Those absurd immortal walls were not the end to the physical barriers she created. In order to restrain the various regions that pioneers resided in, from spreading out, Administrator set down many humongous objects. A huge, unbreakable rock; a swamp that could never be filled; a rapid, uncrossable stream; a gigantic, unfellable tree..."

"H-Hold on. An unfellable tree... you say?"

"Indeed. She granted a ridiculously-sized cedar tree near-infinite priority and durability."

I instinctively recalled that demonic tree—the Gigas Cedar that possessed a hardness that would made one want to cry, and gently rubbed my two palms together under the table.

In other words, that meant the Gigas Cedar did not spring forth naturally in the forest south of Rulid Village but was deployed by Administrator to restrict the villagers from expanding their livable area with its horrifying durability and ability to drain resources, as an artificial obstacle.

So there were still many such objects around this world? And many humans have been persevering for hundreds of years of futile effort in order to remove them...?

Raising my head, the girl who called herself Cardinal looked at me with that usual gaze saying that she saw through to my inner thoughts. Her tiny lips moved and her placid words streamed on.

"...And thus, a peaceful yet idle age continued on and on under the absolute Administrator's reign. Twenty years... thirty years later... the masses lost their disposition for progress; the nobles indulged in their idle lives; swordsmanship, polished by the swordsmen of ancient times, degenerated into a mere performance. As you ought to know. Forty years, fifty years later, Administrator felt a deep satisfaction looking down upon the daily life of the Human World, indolent, as though it was soaked in a languid, warm bath..."

In short, it was like gazing at and relishing an aquarium after putting the finishing touches to its perfect ecosystem. Complicated emotions assailed me upon recalling how I stared at an ant observation kit without getting

bored when I was young and Cardinal, sunk in rumination with her eyes cast down like myself, spoke in a clear voice.

"However, it is impossible for any sort of system to remain in stasis for all eternity. Something was bound to occur sooner or later. ...Seventy years after Quinella became Administrator, she discerned an anomaly of sorts within herself. Incidents happened, that she certainly couldn't turn a blind eye to, such as her consciousness disappearing for short periods even outside of sleep, being unable to recall memories from a few days ago, and beyond all else, the inability to instantly remember those system commands that she should have perfectly committed to memory. Making free use of the supervisor commands, Administrator examined her own fluct light to the last detail... and shuddered at the results. After all, the capacity of the sector used for preserving her memories had reached its limit without her knowledge."

"Li-Limit!?"

I yelled her words back at the story's unexpected development. It was the first time I had heard of a maximum limit to the capacity of the memory space... or to use another word, the data capacity of the soul.

"What's there to be surprised about, is it not logical if you only give it a little thought? The sizes of light cubes that store fluct lights, and actual brains, are limited and as such, so are the number of quantum bits that can be stored."

Turning to Cardinal, calmly speaking on, I raised my right hand and requested clarification.

"Ho-Hold on a moment. Erm... the «light cube» thing that's been popping up in our conversation from earlier is the medium that the fluct lights of the people in the Underworld are saved in, right?"

"What, were you unaware of even that? Indeed, a light cube is shaped as a cube with a length of five centimeters, with each one able to perfectly contain the fluct light of a single Underworld inhabitant, not to mention no resources are necessary to save. A «Light Cube Cluster», with each side measuring three meters, was made by assembling them together."

"Er, erm... gathered together, five centimeters each, three meters..."

I tried to mentally calculate the total number of light cubes, but as I was dividing three hundred by five, Cardinal effortlessly spoke out the answer.

"The logical value for the total would be two hundred and sixteen thousand. However, due to the existence of the «Main Visualizer», the main storage, there ought to be less than that."

"Two hundred and sixteen thousand... So that's the maximum population of the Underworld, huh..."

"Indeed. By the way, there is still a considerable amount of surplus space, so there is no need to worry about the number of empty cubes if you're in the mood to make a baby with some dame."

"Yeah... wait, I won't be making anything like that!"

The young sage returned to the main topic after looking at me shaking my head to and fro in a panic.

"...However, as I've mentioned earlier, each light cube will eventually reach the limit of its memory capacity. Administrator had already lived for a ridiculous hundred and fifty years, including the time between the birth and deterioration of Quinella. The flask containing her memories had finally started overflowing from all that was stored within it throughout this time, inducing difficulties in the writing, preservation, and retrieval of her memories."

It was quite a chilly issue. It wasn't something irrelevant to me; I had already accumulated over two years of memories in this world with an accelerated rate of time. Even if only mere months, or perhaps days, have passed in the real world, the «life span of my soul» was definitely being consumed.

"Rest easy, there are still more than enough blank sheets within your fluct light."

As though she read my thoughts once again, Cardinal pointed it out with a wry smile.

"Wh... when you say it like that, it feels like you're implying that my mind's empty..."

"It would be like a picture book against an encyclopedia, if you compare the two of us."

Taking a sip of the tea with a composed expression, Cardinal cleared her throat.

"—Let me continue. As expected, even Administrator panicked at the unforeseen situation of a limit to her memory capacity. After all, there existed a life span that she had absolutely no control over, unlike one with a numerical value like Life. However, she was not one to willingly accept her fate. Analogous to how she had once usurped the seat of god, that being came up with yet another demonic solution..."

Showing an unpleasant scowl, Cardinal placed the cup back and tightly linked together her two hands, similar to flower petals, above the table.

"...In those days... that is, two hundred years ago, there was a young girl, at the mere age of ten or so, studying sacred arts on the lower floors of the Central Cathedral as an apprentice nun of the church. Her name was... no, I've forgotten her name... She was born in a family of furniture craftsmen in Centoria and through the fluctuations of randomized parameters, she possessed a slightly higher system access authority than others. As such, she was bestowed the sacred task of being a nun. She was a scrawny little lass with brown eyes and curly hair of the same color..."

I involuntarily blinked my eyes and checked Cardinal's appearance, on the other side of the table. I could only imagine that the description previously was one of herself, no matter how it was rephrased.

"Administrator had that little lass brought up to the living room of the top floor of the Cathedral and welcomed her with a smile filled with kindness like a holy mother's. That being spoke thus—'You will be my child from now on. A child of god that will guide the world.'... It was the truth to an extent. In the sense as one inheriting information from her soul. Though naturally, there wasn't a single trace of motherly love. ...Administrator intended to overwrite the little lass's fluct light with the thought domain and important memories of her own."

"Wha..."

A chill crept up my back yet again. Overwriting the soul—the act of speaking those words out alone was repulsive enough. While rubbing together my palms that had gotten damp with cold and sweat without my notice, I forced my numbed mouth to move.

"St... still, if she could manipulate fluct lights to such detail, couldn't she just delete the memories she didn't need?"

"Would you edit an important file without prior preparation?"

Her immediate retort had me at a momentary loss for words and I shook my head.

"N... no, I would make a backup."

"Of course you would. Administrator had not forgotten about the full day she lost consciousness when she once took in the Cardinal System's behavioral principles. That's how dangerous direct fluct light manipulation is. What if I ended up damaging important data while putting my own memories in order... fearing so, she planned to first take over the girl's soul that had plenty of remaining memory capacity, affirm the copy turned out well, then dispose of the soul she had used thus far, worn out to its limit. She was truly meticulous, truly prudent... however, that turned out to be Administrator's... no, Quinella's second blunder."

"Blunder...?"

"Indeed. After all, it was only in that single moment when she possessed that little lass and also governed the existence she had used until then... that the gods carrying that same level of authority numbered two. A fiendish ceremony, thoroughly planned and prepared by Administrator... meant she finally succeeded in hijacking a fluct light through the «Synthesis Ritual»; its name signifying the unification between soul and memory. I... I was waiting for just such a moment... over that long seventy years!!"

I merely stared at Cardinal's face, confused, while she cried out with slight emotion.

"Hold... Hold on a minute. Who exactly are you... the Cardinal that's speaking to me right now?"

"—Do you still not understand?"

At my question, Cardinal pushed her glasses up as she whispered.

"Kirito, you know of my original version, do you not? Try stating the characteristics of the Cardinal System."

"Er... erm..."

Knitting my brows, I brought back memories from my Aincrad days. That automatic management program was first developed by Kayaba Akihiko to manage the death game, SAO. In other words—

"...Making manual adjustments and maintenance unnecessary, and the ability to operate for long stretches of time...?"

"Indeed. And in order to do that..."

"In order to do that, it has two core programs... while the main process carries out balancing adjustments, the sub-process performs an error check on the main..."

Getting to that point in my words, I left my mouth agape and stared at the young girl with swirly, curly hair.

I should have been well aware that the Cardinal System had a powerful error correction function installed. After all, the AI, «Yui», who became the daughter of Asuna and myself while we were clearing SAO was originally a subordinate program of Cardinal, and I desperately struggled to save her from Cardinal who recognized her as a foreign body and mercilessly tried to eliminate her.

To be specific, I simply accessed the SAO's program space from a system console, searched for the files that made up Yui, compressed them, and set that as an object; carrying it out in the few tens of seconds before Cardinal detected my system intervention and quarantining it, however, was probably a true miracle in itself. That enormous presence I confronted, with a single holo-keyboard between us, was truly Cardinal's error correction process... which would also perhaps be this lovely girl sitting before my own eyes right now.

Aware or not of my complex, deep emotions, Cardinal spoke with a light sigh as though she was dealing with an unperceptive child.

"So it seems you have finally noticed. —The principles of behavior Quinella carved into her own fluct light did not merely include one. The instruction given to the main process, «to preserve the world». And the instruction given to the sub-process, «to correct the errors made by the main process»."

"Correct... the errors?"

"When I was still a program yet to gain awareness, I existed purely to continuously examine the data expelled by the main process. However... when I gained individuality as a «shadow consciousness» of Quinella, so to speak, I had to judge my own conduct without assistance from

redundant code or anything of that sort. You see... it would be somewhat like what you lot call a «split personality»."

"I believe there are some with the opinion that split personalities exist only in fiction, though."

"Oh, really now. However, it is truly a tale I could consent to, you see. Only in that instant Quinella's consciousness slightly relaxed, could I float to the surface of her thought process. And I thought. About what an atrocious error this woman, Quinella... no, Administrator was committing, that is."

"Was it... an error...?"

I instinctively asked in return. After all, if the preservation of the world formed the basis of Cardinal's main process, what Quinella had done would be in tune with that principle regardless of how radical the measures adopted were.

However, Cardinal answered in a dignified tone, taking my glance head-on.

"Then allow me to ask you. Has the Cardinal System of that other world you knew ever harmed players of its own volition, even once?"

"N.... no, it didn't. True, it was the players' ultimate enemy, but... there weren't any unreasonable direct attacks, sorry about that."

When I spontaneously apologized, Cardinal gave a short snort through her nose and continued.

"However, she did. She imposed a penalty more cruel than even death upon those who showed signs of harboring suspicion or opposing the Taboo Index she established... However, I shall leave the details for later. In that extremely rare respite from sleep, I, the Cardinal System's sub-process, judged that Administrator was a major error in and of herself and attempted to purge that. To be specific, I tried to jump down from the top floor thrice, tried to stab my heart with a knife twice, and tried to incinerate my own self with sacred arts twice. After all, if I could reduce my Life to zero in one action, even the highest minister would not be exempted from erasure."

The heroic words coming out from the mouth of the young, sweet girl rendered me speechless. But Cardinal continued ahead in a composed tone without the slightest twitch from her eyebrows.

"The final attempt was a true pity. By releasing a sacred art with an exceptional offensive ability from among the entire lot, raining a continual tempest of lightning bolt strikes onto myself, even Administrator's enormous Life was reduced to a mere single digit. However, the main process then seized control over the body... With things in that state, any sort of injury or fatal wound was rendered null. She returned to as she always was in the blink of an eye with a full recovery sacred art ritual. Moreover, due to that incident, even with all she had, Administrator genuinely regarded me... in other words, the sub-process under her subconscious, as a danger. Upon noticing that the only times I could wedge myself into the right of control was when some conflict occurs within her fluct light... or simply put, during times of emotional distress, she tried an unthinkable method to hold me in."

"Unthinkable...?"

"Yes. Even if she was chosen as a sorceress of Stacia from birth, Administrator was a child of man. She possessed the emotions to look at flowers and think them beautiful or to listen to music and find it fun, at the very least. The emotional circuit she developed back then still remained in the depths of her soul even after turning into an absolute being, half-human and half-god. She judged that emotion was the source of her unrest whenever she encountered an unexpected event, however slight it might be. Therefore, she made free use of the supervisor-only commands to manipulate her fluct light within her light cube and suspended her own emotional circuit."

"Wha... suspending her circuit, does that mean that she was basically destroying a part of her soul?"

I replied while shuddering and Cardinal returned a muted nod with a grimace.

"B-But well, something as outrageous as that... sounds like an even more dangerous action than the copying of her fluct light earlier, though..."

"Of course, she did not handle her own soul without prior preparation or anything of that sort. The woman, Administrator, was one cautious enough to hate the very idea of that, see. —Have you already noticed the presence of various hidden parameters not displayed upon the Stacia Window... or in other words, the status window?"

"Aah, well, somewhat... I saw a handful of humans with strength and agility not matching their outward appearances, after all..."

The one that came to mind while I answered was the one I served for a year as a valet trainee, Sortiliena-senpai. Her body was slender, narrow, and perhaps could even be thought of as delicate, but she overpowered me many times when we locked swords.

The young girl from whom I felt a limitless dignity, despite an outward appearance more fragile than senpai, lightly lifted and dropped her hat at my words.

"Yes. And within those hidden parameters, there exists one called «Transgression Quotient»[1]. A value evaluated by analyzing the compliance to the law and rules of each inhabitant through their speech and conduct, converted into numerals. It was probably created for easy monitoring for observers from the outer world, but... Administrator quickly noticed this transgression quotient parameter could be used to reveal the humans skeptical of the Taboo Index she established. To that being, such humans were like bacteria that snuck into a sterilized room. She felt an urgent need to exterminate them, but she could not break that single command to not murder passed down, to her as well, by her parents when she was young. Therefore, in order to render those inhabitants with a high transgression quotient harmless without resorting to murder, Administrator instead carried out a dreadful procedure upon them..."

"That's... the thing that you spoke of earlier, that penalty more cruel than death?"

"Absolutely. She had those humans with a high transgression quotient serve as experimental subjects for art rituals to manipulate their fluct light directly. Which part of the light cube stored which information, which part should be tampered with to make them lose their memories, lose their emotions, lose their thought processes, and so on... even the observers from the outside world hesitated to carry out such atrocious human experiments."

I felt goosebumps creep up my arms the moment I heard that last phrase, spoken in a whisper.

Cardinal, too, made a dismal expression and continued on in a deathly-stifled voice.

"...The humans offered up for the initial experiments mostly forfeited their individualities, reduced to beings that existed purely to breathe. Administrator froze their flesh and Life, and preserved them in the cathedral. Her fluct light manipulation art advanced through the repetition of such injustice. She performed the suspension of her emotions in a bid to hold me in, too, only after attempting time after time on the humans brought to the tower. She was around a hundred years old then."

"...Did she, succeed?"

"You could say she did. She failed in abandoning all emotions but succeeded in purging those that acted as the source of that abrupt unrest: fear, fright, and anger. From then, Administrator's heart did not waver regardless of the kind of event she encountered. She was truly a god... no, she was truly a machine. A consciousness that existed only to preserve, stabilize, and stagnate the world... I was held within a nook of that being's soul, losing all chance to appear on the surface. Until that being was at the age of a hundred and fifty, reached the capacity limit of a fluct light, and tried to take over the soul of a pitiful lass, that is."

"But... according to how the story went, the soul from Administrator that took over the daughter of the furniture shop owner was a perfect copy of the original, right? In other words, that soul would have its emotions purged too... so, why were you able to appear at that particular time?"

Cardinal's gaze wandered elsewhere for a while at my question. She must be peering into the other end of these extraordinarily long two hundred years.

Before long, an extremely, extremely soft voice streamed out from those petite lips.

"My vocabulary does not contain the words needed to accurately express what happened in that instant... in that experience, wonderful, despite how it should have made one tremble... Calling the daughter of the furniture shop owner to the top floor of the cathedral, Administrator attempted to copy and overwrite via the Synthesis Ritual. And that succeeded without a hitch. What resided within the lass had its useless memories erased, what could be said to be a compressed version of Administrator's, no, Quinella's individuality. The initial arrangement should have been for the original Quinella, who expended her life span, to erase her own soul after confirming the success... however..."

Cardinal's cheeks, adorned by a healthy blush as befitting a young girl, had already lost their color like a sheet of paper when I finally noticed. She asserted that she possessed no emotions, but I couldn't imagine what she felt at this moment to be anything but a deep fear.

"...However, the duplication of her soul finished... the instant we simultaneously opened our eyes at point-blank range... some sort of tremendous impact assailed us. That was essentially... the thought of avoiding a situation where two of the exact same human exist, a situation that would have originally been impossible... I believe it would be something close to that? I... no, we stared at each other and immediately after, sensed an overwhelming hostility. Regardless of the circumstances, we couldn't permit the existence of the soul before our eyes, that was how it seemed... It exceeded pure emotion, into instinct... no, it might have been somewhat like the number one rule engraved upon the beliefs of intelligent beings. If that situation were to remain, both souls probably would not have been able to bear the shock and would be annihilated. However... I am unsure if I should call it a pity, but that did not happen. After all, the fluct light copied into the daughter of the furniture shop owner broke a moment faster and in that instant, I, the sub-individuality, established the right of control. We recognized each other as Administrator, residing within the body originally belonging to Quinella, and Cardinal's sub-process, residing within the body belonging to the daughter of the furniture shop owner. With that, the souls ceased breaking down and stabilized."

A soul breaking down.

Cardinal's words brought to mind the gloomy and wonderous phenomenon I had seen two evenings ago, one that I wasn't sure whether to be sad or glad for.

I crossed swords with the head elite swordsman-in-training of the Sword Mastery Academy, Raios Antinous, and slashed off his two arms with the Serlut-style secret move, «Whirling Current». That major injury could have been considered a fatal wound in the real world, but his life would not have ended in the Underworld with proper treatment. I would have tried to maintain the numerical value of his Life—what served as hit points in this world, by binding the open wounds on his two arms to stop the blood flow.

However, before that could happen… A bizarre scream poured from Raios as he collapsed onto the floor and met his end.

Blood had continued flowing out from his wounds at that time. That is to say, his Life value had not yet reached zero, so in other words, that meant that Raios had died from a reason other than the total loss of Life.

Right before collapsing, Raios found himself in a situation where he had a choice between his life and the Taboo Index; one to protect and one to break. He could not choose and his soul finally ended up tearing itself apart, trapped in an infinite loop state, didn't it?

Could the phenomenon that assaulted Quinella upon meeting a duplicate of her own self be fundamentally the same thing? I couldn't even begin to imagine the horror that came with the situation of having another existence with the exact same memories and thoughts as oneself.

I couldn't form a conclusion on the possibility that I was an artificial fluct light copied from the real Kirigaya Kazuto in those few days after I woke up in the forest south of Rulid. That fear remained somewhere in my mind until I affirmed that I could go against the Taboo Index, while recognizing it as the absolute law, with cooperation from Selka from Rulid Church.

If nothing but my consciousness was thrown out into an endless darkness, and my own, familiar voice spoke. 'You are my duplicate. You are merely a copy for experimenting with, one that can be deleted with a single keypress.' How severe would the shock, confusion, and fright taste in that moment?

"—How is it going, have you understood everything so far?"

Those mentor-like words were thrown at me, as I pondered over everything with my head overheating, from the opposite side of the table. Raising my head, I blinked countless times before nodding in a vague manner.

"Ah... well, somewhat..."

"I'm going to finally reach the main point of my tale, so it would be troubling if you were already going to whine from this much."

"The main point... I see, that's right. I still haven't heard exactly what you wanted out of me."

"Yes. I did continue waiting ever since that day through these two hundred years to tell you this, after all... Now then, I believe I was at the part where I split off from Administrator?"

Cardinal spoke as she fiddled with the now-empty tea cup, spinning it with both hands.

"—On that day, I finally acquired a physical body of my own. To be accurate though, it belonged to that pitiful apprentice nun, but... her individuality had been utterly annihilated the moment her light cube was overwritten with data. Born from that ruthless ceremony and the result of that unforeseen incident, I stared at Administrator before my eyes for 0.3 seconds before finally taking the logical course of action. In other words, I tried to eliminate her with sacred arts of the highest level. I was a perfect copy of Administrator, which meant I had a system access authority at an equal level, you see. I predicted that I could slice away her Life before the resources in the surrounding space were exhausted if I could gain the initiative, even if it became an exchange of arts of the same class. My first attack landed magnificently and what ensued after went according to my expectations. A death match of immense lightning and whirlwinds clashing, infernos and ice daggers unfolded with the top floor of the Central Cathedral as our stage, and our Lives rapidly plummeting. Our pace was exactly the same... in other words, I, the one who had let loose the first attack, should have been the one to win."

My body abruptly shuddered upon imagining that skirmish between gods. My knowlege of offensive sacred arts was limited to the extremely rudimentary ones that change the shapes of elements, like those used in the battle against Knight Eldrie. Their offensive abilities were far from reaching a single sword strike, struggling to even act as restraints or distractions, hardly able to take away the Life of anyone around.....

"—Huh, wait a moment. You said that even Administrator wasn't capable of killing somebody, didn't you? Then shouldn't that restriction apply to you as well, as a copy? Why were both of you able to attack each other?"

Cardinal slightly pouted at her story getting interrupted at the good part, as she nodded and replied.

"Mgh... that was a good question. True, it is as you've said, even Administrator, unbound by the Taboo Index as she was, could not break the prohibition on murder given to her when she was young, as Quinella, by her parents. I have still yet to elucidate the origin behind the phenomenon why we artificial fluct lights are unable to disobey all orders without exception even after many long years of deliberation... however, this phenomenon is not as absolute as you might think."

"...Which means...?"

"To show an example..."

Cardinal moved her right hand that held the tea cup above the table. For some reason though, she was not lowering the cup onto the saucer but onto the right, an empty space—her arm came to a precise stop immediately before its bottom touched the table cloth.

"I am unable to lower this cup any further."

"Hah?"

Cardinal explained as she scowled at my dumbfounded response.

"The reason is because when I was young, my mother—of course, that would actually be Quinella's—brought me up with the trivial rule that «tea cups should be placed atop a saucer» and its effect is still valid, even now. The only significant taboo was murder, but there exist seventeen other foolish prohibitions such as this. I am unable to lower my arm any further no matter what I do and if I forcibly put strength into it, an annoying, intense pain emerges in my right eye."

"...A pain in... your right eye..."

"Even so, this is a huge difference compared to the average inhabitant. They would be unable to even imagine the thought of placing the cup upon the table in the first place. In other words, they could not even gain the awareness that they are bound by many unbreakable rules. That may be the best for them, however..."

Probably aware that she was a completely artificial being, an unfitting self-derisive smile ran over Cardinal's young face, and she quickly straightened her arm back.

"Now then... Kirito. Do you see this as a tea cup?"

"Heh?"

Letting out a stupid voice, I intensely stared at the empty cup gripped in Cardinal's right hand.

It was made of white ceramic, simple curves for its sides, with a plain handle attached. No designs or logos could be seen aside from a dark-blue line along its edge.

"Well... I do see it as a tea cup, there was tea in it, after all..."

"Fm. Then, how about now?"

Cardinal reached out with the index finger on her left hand, then lightly tapped the cup's edge.

Liquid immediately flowed up from the bottom of the cup like earlier and a stream of white vapor rose. However, the aroma differed this time. My nose instinctively twitched. This smell, fragrant with its richness, was definitely not any sort of black tea—it couldn't be anything but cream of corn soup.

Cardinal tilted the cup slightly as though showing it to me as I stretched out my neck. It was a pale-yellow, gooey fluid as I expected, filling the cup to its brim. There were even croutons, carefully baked brown, floating in there.

"Co-Corn soup! Thank you, I just started feeling peckish and..."

"You dolt, I'm not asking about its contents. What is this vessel?"

"Eeh...? Well... that's-"

Not a single change had occurred to the cup itself from earlier. But now that she mentioned it, it might have been a little too simple, too large, and too thick for a typical tea cup.

"Aah... A soup cup?"

When I timidly answered, Cardinal broadly grinned as she nodded.

"Yes. This is now a soup cup. After all, there certainly is soup within it now."

And, as if she was showing off, she placed the cup, as it was, onto the table cloth without any hesitation, ringing out a thud.

"Wha...!?"

"Look. This is how ambiguous the taboos given to us artificial fluct lights are. They can be overruled this easily simply by changing our subjective perception."

"....."

Even while I was shocked into silence, that particular scene from two days ago replayed in my mind once again.

Back then, Raios was about to mercilessly swing his sword down at Eugeo, cowering away, at the exact moment I barged into the bedroom. Raios's sword would have probably severed Eugeo's neck in a single slash if I hadn't taken it on with my own sword.

Murder was obviously the greatest taboo. But in that instant, Eugeo was not a fellow human in Raios's viewpoint but a major criminal that had violated the Taboo Index. By recognizing that, he easily dodged past the taboo engraved upon his soul.

As I continued to brood in silence, a light sound rang out from the one leaning against the back support of the opposing chair. Upon taking a look, Cardinal was lifting up the tea cup -correction, soup cup once again and moved it to her lips. The meat buns and sandwiches I had eaten tens of minutes ago had already been converted to numerals in my Life, and my stomach could feel a tight, squeezing sensation.

"...Could I have some of that too?"

"You certainly are a gluttonous fellow. Hand over your cup."

While shaking her head as though she was astounded, Cardinal still reached out with her left hand and flicked the edge of the cup I pushed forward with a ping. The empty cup immediately filled with the fragrant creamy yellow liquid.

Pulling the cup back in excitement and sipping from it after blowing at the steam, my eyes involuntarily closed at the nostalgic, rich flavor spreading within my mouth. There were soups somewhat similar in Underworld too, but it had truly been two years since I had drank such perfect cream of corn soup.

I let out a satisfied sigh after drinking two, three mouthfuls, then Cardinal's story resumed as though she had been waiting for that.

"Understand this; the taboos binding us are things that can be overruled with merely altering our perception, as I demonstrated with the cup earlier. We... Administrator and I did not think of each other as human the moment we broke into battle. In my eyes, she was a broken system that would harm the world, and in hers, I was a bothersome virus she could not eliminate... There wasn't a single shred of hesitation as we cut each other's Lives away. We exchanged arts of the highest class and I was finally two or three attacks away from eliminating Administrator, or at the very least, bringing it to a draw."

Perhaps recalling the vexation from that time, Cardinal firmly chewed on her small lips.

"However... however, you see. At the end of ends, that depraved woman realized that decisive difference between herself and me."

"Decisive difference...? But the only difference between Administrator and you would be the outward appearances... the two had the exact same system access authority and sacred arts you were versed in as well, right?"

"Naturally. The one who succeeded with the preemptive strike, myself, would obviously be the one to gain victory in the end. Therefore... she threw sacred arts aside. Converting one among the heaps of high priority objects in the room into a weapon, she also at the same time designated the entire space we were battling into an address where system commands were prohibited."

"If... if she did something like that, wouldn't she be unable to lift the prohibition too?"

"Yes, as long as she remained in the space, that is. I realized her aim the moment she chanted the command for weapon creation. However, there was nothing I could do by then. I couldn't lift it either once commands were negated, after all... I reluctantly made a weapon as well and attempted to put an end to her via physical damage."

Cardinal stopped talking and lifted the staff set against the table. She presented it to me in silence, so I reached out with my right hand despite my bewilderment. A weight unimaginable from its slim appearance assailed my right arm the moment I took hold of it and I panicked, using my left hand as well, to barely hold onto it until it touched down upon the table. The staff, which was then laid down onto its side with a heavy thump, evidently possessed a priority higher than both my black sword and Eugeo's Blue Rose Sword.

"I see... it's not just your sacred arts usage authority that's god class, but your weapon equipping authority too, huh?"

When I said so while rubbing my right wrist, Cardinal shrugged her shoulders as though it was only natural.

"Administrator copied not only her memories and thought processes but all of her authorities and Life levels as well, you see. The sword that person generated and this staff that I generated had the exact same level of ability. Even when stuck with physical combat after discarding sacred arts, I thought I would be the one to gain victory in the end. However, upon assuming a stance with the staff, I finally realized Administrator's true aim, that is, that decisive difference between her and me..."

"That's why I'm asking, what exactly is that difference?"

"It's simple. Look at this body."

Cardinal opened the front of her thick robe with her right hand and exposed her body clad in a white blouse, black breeches, and white knee-high socks. It was the figure of a young girl, slim and petite; one that contrasted her manner of speech, like that of an elderly sage, far too much.

Feeling as though I saw something I shouldn't, I asked with my eyes instinctively cast down.

"Exactly what... about that body...?"

Her robe fluttering as she restored it to how it was, Cardinal groaned as though she was irritated.

"Goodness, you're certainly slow, aren't you? Try imagining yourself getting thrown into this body. Your perspective and arm lengths would be utterly different. Would you be able to wield and fight with a sword as you've always done like that?"

"...Ah..."

"Until that moment, I had always been in Administrator's... that is, Quinella's body which was rather tall for a woman. I didn't take much notice of it during our exchange of sacred arts, but... at the point when I wielded this staff and braced for the enemy's attack, I finally understood that I had been chased into a critical plight."

I certainly could agree now that she pointed it out. Even in the numerous VRMMOs in the real world, getting used to judging distances in close-range physical combat if one were to choose an avatar with a size much too far away from one's real body required quite an amount of time.

"...By the way, what's the difference in height between Administrator and yourself as you currently are...?"

"It ought to easily be over fifty centimeters. That broad grin she had on her face as she looked down upon me from her height is still vivid in my memories. The battle started anew immediately after, but upon crossing weapons rampantly two or three times, I had no choice but to admit my defeat was certain..."

"Th-Then... what happened?"

She obviously clambered out of it somehow, seeing as she was talking to me, but I still ended up holding my breath unintentionally.

"Administrator's advantage was decisive, but she also committed a single mistake. You see, if she had locked the room's exit before prohibiting the usage of system commands, I would have been killed with no path of escape. Possessing no human emotions, I—"

Cardinal's expression appeared truly vexed, but I won't be cutting in the conversation with that.

"—judged that I had to withdraw not a moment sooner and ran towards the door like lightning. All while Administrator's sword, swinging down from behind, reduced my Life as it grazed my back..."

"Th-That was... scary, huh..."

"I did expect you would someday end up in a situation like mine too, though. With how you've been ogling and flirting with females everywhere during these two years and two months."

"I... I haven't been ogling, flirting, or doing anything of that sort."

I strongly rubbed my mouth upon receiving that unforeseen assault, then abruptly frowned.

"N-No, wait a minute. Two years and two months... don't tell me you've always been watching me...?"

"Of course I have. It may have been two years and two months among the two hundred years I went through, but it was still unexpectedly long."

"Whaa....."

I could feel nothing but astonishment. So that meant this young sage had observed my every action here and there down to the last detail? It wasn't like I was purposefully taking any action of questionable conduct that I couldn't let others see, but neither did I have the confidence to say that I didn't take any. However, there wasn't any time to inspect the individual memories over the last two and a bit years right now... or so I told myself, forcibly pulling back my thoughts.

"W-Well, I won't chase the issue for now. ...So, how did you escape from Administrator?"

"Fn. —Getting out of the living room on the top floor of the cathedral somehow, I regained the authority to use sacred arts, but the situation did not change. After all, if I tried to counterattack with sacred arts, she would simply have to designate the hallway as a prohibited space this time. It would be like doing nothing but changing my means of escape from running to flight. I figured I needed to run into areas her attacks could not reach to remake my preparations."

"Even if you say that... Administrator's the supervisor of the world like her name suggests, right? Is there anywhere she can't get in?"

"Certainly, she was a god that assumed the name of a supervisor, but she doesn't quite possess the absolute omnipotence of one. There are only two places in this world where she can't do as she likes."

"Two places...?"

"One would be beyond the mountain range at the edge... the Dark Territory that the masses of the Human World labeled the land of darkness. The other would be the Great Library Room that we are in right now. In the beginning, this library room was a space created by Administrator upon finding out about the limit to her own memory, to use as an external memory storage device, so to speak. It stores the extensive amount of data related to all system commands as well as Underworld. —Thus, she thought that she had to do all she could to prevent any human aside from herself from coming in here. Hence, she set it within the cathedral despite not linking it there spatially. There exists only a single door to enter and additionally, the command to call it out was known only to her... no, only to her and me."

"H-Haa..."

I looked around the Great Library Room with its passages, stairs and bookshelves arranged over several floors once again. The cylindrical wall appeared to be made from plain bricks, but—

"Then, beyond that wall is..."

"Nothing. The wall itself is invincible, but it is likely only a stretch of nothingness would await you on its other side if it ever broke."

I started wondering exactly what would happen if one plunged in there, but I lightly shook my head and shifted my thoughts away.

"—Erm, that single door you mentioned was the one we passed through when we entered from the rose garden earlier?"

"Nay, that door was one I created much later. Humongous double doors existed in the center of the lowest floor until two hundred years ago. As I ran from Administrator's pursuit with my life at stake, I recited the art to call out those doors. I was still obstructed around two times despite my speed. Somehow completing the command, I leapt through the doors that appeared beyond the hallway, and immediately shut and locked them."

"Locked... that said, the highest minister's authority level was the same as yours, so wouldn't it get opened from the other side?"

"I suppose. However, luckily, while locking it from inside the library room is done by turning the key ninety degrees to the right, unlocking it from outside required a tedious art ritual. Separated by a single set of doors, I chanted a new art ritual while listening to Administrator's voice, filled with a cold intent to murder, chant the unlock command. The moment the key turned to the left before my eyes was roughly the same time as I finished my ritual..."

Perhaps recalling her memories of that time, Cardinal gently squeezed her own body with her arms. It was a story from two hundred years ago, but a chill ran down my spine from just imagining the scene. Finishing up the corn soup, of which a little remained, I took in a breath of air and asked.

"The ritual you chanted then was one to rupture the door... is that it?"

"Yes. I severed the one and only path that linked the cathedral to this Great Library Room, those huge doors, into tiny pieces. In that instant, this place was completely isolated from the outside world and I managed to escape from Administrator's pursuit... and that's how it happened."

"...And the reason why the highest minister didn't make a door again...?"

"I mentioned earlier, did I not, that Administrator first created the Great Library Room with the doors, after which she separated it from the cathedral. The coordinate values of this space in the system are constantly changing random numbers in unused regions. Unless one could accurately predict those integers, external interference is no longer possible."

"I see... But the Central Cathedral's coordinates are fixed, so it's possible to connect passages from here to the outside, huh?"

"That's exactly it. That said, doors created are immediately detected by Administrator's familiars after they are opened even once, so they can't be used a second time. Like that door in the rose garden that picked both Eugeo and you up earlier."

"I-I'm really sorry about that..."

I lowered my head meekly and the young sage let out a small laugh before shifting her sight towards the library room's domed ceiling. The two eyes

beyond her glasses narrowed and she murmured as though mulling over something.

"...I fought the error I should have been correcting, Administrator, and irrefutably lost. Fleeing in an unsightly manner, I took refuge in this place... devoting myself to absolutely nothing but observation and deliberation for the two hundred years since..."

"...Two hundred years..."

—Or so I muttered, but there was no way I, who experienced seventeen and a half years in the real world and an accelerated two years in Underworld for a total of less than twenty years, could grasp a real feel for that length of time. I could only image it as a vast stream of time at most.

The girl before my eyes had lived through a period of time that could practically be said to be equivalent to infinity. On her own in this Great Library Room without even a single rat, surrounded only by mountains of silent books. Even words like solitude failed to express it any longer, that was the utter isolation from the world. I could never stand two hundred years even if I was left in this same situation. I would definitely open the door on my own volition even if I knew it led to my own ruin.

No, wait. Before that—

"Cardinal... you did say the lifespan of a fluct light was around a hundred and fifty years, didn't you? Nearing that limit was what made Administrator try and copy her own fluct light and all... How exactly did you get through those two hundred years worth of time after splitting off?"

"I suppose it was only natural for you to ask that."

Cardinal took some time to return the now-empty cup onto the table, then nodded.

"Even if my fluct light was a copy selectively sorted by Administrator, there isn't anywhere near the scope needed for an even longer stretch of memories to be placed in. Therefore, rearranging my own memories had to be my first course of action upon securing the momentary safety after escaping into the Great Library Room."

"Re-Rearranging...?"

"Indeed. The topic that came out earlier in that example, directly editing a file without a backup. My consciousness would have probably dissolved

into light within the light cube if even a single accident occurred during the operation."

"Er-Erm... So, that means you still held the authority to manipulate that Light Cube Cluster somewhere in the real world even after getting confined within this library room, right? In that case, rather than accessing your own, wouldn't it be possible to go for Administrator's fluct light and do some kind of attack like blasting away her soul...?"

"That would work just as well the other way round, after all. But unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately, the type of sacred arts that change a target's state generally require one to be in direct contact with the target unit or object, or at the very least, have the target within one's line of sight. Even with the concept of «range» around, that is. As such, that was why Administrator had to bother taking the daughter of the furniture shop owner all the way up to the top floor of the cathedral, and like how she needed to take you and Eugeo to the church."

I involuntarily shivered upon hearing that. If we hadn't succeeded in our reckless breakout, who knew what would have happened at the place where interrogation and whatever else would be conducted.

"—In other words, having isolated myself in this library room, I was unable to attack Administrator's fluct light regardless of how much power I had and was able to avert attacks from her at the same time."

Regardless of whether she knew of my anxiety or not, Cardinal lowered her long eyelashes behind those glasses and continued her words.

"Rearranging my own soul... was truly an intimidating operation. After all, those memories that could currently be vividly recalled would disappear without leaving a trace behind with a single command. However, I had no choice but to do it. I could easily imagine that it would take a terrifyingly long time to delete Administrator with the state of affairs then, you see. —In the end, I deleted all the memories I had when I was Quinella, as well as those after becoming Administrator; ninety-seven percent in all..."

"Wha... th-that's practically everything, isn't it!?"

"Indeed. That long, long story of Quinella I spoke to you about was actually not experienced personally by myself but merely knowledge I wrote down before the deletion. I cannot even remember the faces of the parents who brought me up. Neither the warmth of the bed I fell into slumber each night, nor the taste of the sweet fried bread I used to love... I mentioned, didn't I,

that I do not even possess a single shred of human emotions. I am a program with nearly all memories and emotions lost, taking action purely under the order branded into my soul, «to stop the main process that went insane». That's the sort of existence I am."

"....."

Cardinal's face was cast downwards as a smile rose to its surface, but it appeared to be filled with a loneliness so deep that it couldn't be expressed in words from my point of view. You aren't a program; you should have emotions just like me and the rest of the humans; I wanted to say so, but the words wouldn't come out.

Raising her face, Cardinal glanced at me sunk in silence and smiled again before she began moving her mouth once more.

"...As the result of selectively deleting my memories, I secured sufficient free capacity in my fluct light for the time being. Having gained much time, I recovered from my miserable escape and worked on a plan in order to deal a blow against Administrator in return. —I considered catching her unaware and bringing a face-to-face fight to her once again. It's not possible to open a passage to this library room from outside, but as you stated earlier, the reverse is true, after all. The command to install a door has a «range» as well, but anywhere from the Central Cathedral's garden to its middle floors are within it. She does descend to the lower floors of the tower, although seldom, so opening a door at those times could open up the possibility for a surprise attack. And I have gotten used to controlling this body unexpectedly easily too."

"...So that's it. It does sound worth it if you can guarantee a preemptive attack, but... still, it's quite a gamble, right? It wouldn't have been odd if Administrator had something up her sleeves..."

A surprise attack rarely succeeds with the other party conscious of the possbility. There were several times I set up and was set up for an ambush in my SAO times too, but most of the time it didn't work out with the target on his or her guard, thinking 'a surprise attack looks likely to happen over there'. Cardinal nodded, seemingly annoyed, when I pointed it out.

"Before Quinella even became the highest minister, she had the gift for finding out others' weaknesses. Like how she noticed my weakness; my stature, in the midst of that battle after we separated, she deduced the

advantage she had that I didn't in the new state of affairs and made haste to utilize it."

"Advantage... But you and Administrator basically possess the exact same level of capability in offense and defense, right? And well, how do I say this, also your intellects."

"I do have qualms with how you put it, evidently."

She snorted, then continued.

"There is almost no difference in combat potential between her and I by ourselves. Of course, that applies only while it stays as a one-on-one match, of course."

"One-on-one... —Aah, so that's it."

"That's indeed how it is. I am a recluse with no one to turn to, while in comparison to her, she is the ruler of an enormous organization, the Axiom Church... Administrator became strongly aware of the perils of copying her own fluct light through giving birth to a hindrance, me, and being driven to the brink of death. That said, the circumstances of her synaptic pathways failing due to her memory overload had not changed. She had to resort to something, but unlike me, she did not venture into the high-risk measure of directly editing her memories. There, she reluctantly settled with a compromise. She maintained the minimum free capacity required by deleting extremely recent peripheral memories, an operation with a low risk, and reduced the amount of newly recorded information to the best of her ability."

"Reduce... even though you say that, don't memories just accumulate as you go through each day whether you want them to or not?"

"It depends on the way you spend it, does it not? More information gets inputted the more you see, the more places you go, the more thoughts you think, but how would it be for example if you didn't take even a single step from the canopy bed in your room and spent the entire time with your eyes shut?"

"Uh... there's no way I could do that. I would even prefer swinging a sword for the entire day."

"I am aware of your lack of composure well enough without needing you to point it out now."

I couldn't say anything about that. I don't know her objectives in doing so, but if Cardinal had always been observing my actions, she would have already been well aware of those casual strolls I took without informing Eugeo whenever I had free time.

Immediately tightening her mouth that was slowly forming into a smile, the sage continued talking.

"...However, Administrator does not have those 'I'm bored' or 'I have nothing to do' emotions, unlike you. That person would lie on her bed for days and weeks if necessary. Immersing in her sweet memories, from a time before she became the ruler of the world, within her semi-conscious slumber, that is..."

"But she's the one at the top of the Axiom Church, right? Wouldn't she have duties to perform, speeches to give, or anything else that she has no choice but to do on account of her position?"

"Certainly, there are such responsibilities. She has to have an audience with the four emperors during the religious festival at the start of the year and she needs to descend to the middle and lower floors of the cathedral to check on the management system for the world at scheduled times. And each time with her guard up against any possible surprise attacks from me too. There, Administrator took up new measures. She delegated most of her duties and at the same time, gathered loyal yet powerful followers to serve as her escorts..."

"And so there's the advantage that you, alone by yourself, don't have and that she, as the ruler of an enormous organization, does, huh? ...On the contrary though, doesn't that increase the level of uncertainty? If she gathers several escorts capable of facing off against you, with the same level of combat potential as her, and those people decided to rebel against her, Administrator wouldn't be able to prevail either, right?"

Cardinal lightly shrugged her shoulders and repeated that same word as a reply to my question.

"Didn't I say they were absolutely loyal?"[2]

"Sure, the inhabitants of this world don't disobey orders from their superiors, but you did say that wasn't an absolute either. If those escorts were to think that the highest minister was a pawn of the land of darkness by some influence..."

"Naturally, that woman understands that the possibility is not zero also. After all, she did turn a multitude of humans with high transgression quotients into research subjects. Blind obedience is not always loyalty... no, that woman would not trust an escort even if the escort swore an oath of allegiance from the heart. After all, that woman was betrayed by even a copy of herself."

Saying so, Cardinal broadly grinned.

"She required a guarantee that the escorts would definitely not betray her under any circumstances to then bestow upon them authorities and equipment worthy of opposing me. So what could she do? The answer was simple: she would merely have to alter them to become so, through their very fluct lights."

"...Wh-What did you say?"

"The complex command for that had already been completed. Namely, the «Synthesis Ritual»."

"Erm... the unification between soul and memory, was it?"

"Yes. In addition, she had a plentiful supply of high-quality raw materials that possessed powerful souls. The humans with high transgression quotients she had captured, used in her experiments and frozen for preservation afterward, were all endowed with high capabilities, without a single exception. ...Or rather, perhaps I should say that they had harbored suspicion towards the Taboo Index and Axiom Church due to their excellent wisdom and physique... There was a hero known as an unparallelled swordsman, who ran to the remote regions with his comrades and pioneered his own village due to his hatred for the church's rule, among those first captured. That swordsman tried to cross the «mountain range at the edge» that separated the Human World and the Dark Territory, which was what caused him to get abducted by the church, but Administrator chose him to be her first loyal escort."

It sounded like a story I heard somewhere; Cardinal continued onward while I struggled in chasing after that thought.

"Most of that swordsman's memories were damaged by the experiments, but that, on the contrary, tilted more to Administrator's advantage. Any memories before his capture were merely a nuisance, after all. That person used an object that enforces unconditional loyalty towards her, the «Piety Module», and... well, it looks like a purple prism around this size..."

Cardinal held her small hands apart about ten centimeters as she spoke.

The hair over my entire body jolted up the instant I pictured that object in my mind. I had seen that thing before. And it had been just a few hours ago too.

"...In the Synthesis Ritual, that prism embeds itself into the target's head through the middle of the forehead. Through that, the soul that had its memories plundered unifies with the manufactured memories that also serve as principles of behavior, resulting in a new individuality. A supreme warrior who swears an oath of absolute allegiance to the church and Administrator, and acts purely for the sake of preserving the Human World as it is... The ritual succeeded and Administrator termed the person who awoke as an Integrator, as he was one who reforms disorder, preserves integrity, and unifies all under the church's rule, across the entire world. If you're climbing the cathedral, the possibility of that person, the oldest integrity knight, standing before you and Eugeo is not zero. It would be best to remember his name."

Cardinal stared into my face and solemnly continued.

"Bercouli Synthesis One... that is the name of that knight."

"...N-No, that's impossible, there's no way that's it."

I shook my head with all my might before Cardinal could close her lips.

Bercouli.

Wasn't that the name of that legendary great hero Eugeo had once told me about, with an expression filled with admiration? He was the brave warrior from the first generation of settlers at Rulid Village; he explored the mountain range at the edge and tried to steal the «Blue Rose Sword» from the white dragon that protected the Human World.

I believe not even Eugeo knew about Bercouli's final years. Eugeo probably imagined he had continued living in Rulid and grown old—the thought that Bercouli had been abducted by Administrator and remodeled into her first integrity knight would never have occurred to him.

"Hey... hey, Cardinal, you also know how Eugeo and I teamed up, and still had an extremely difficult fight against Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-one... who would be the thirty-first integrity knight, right? How could you expect us to fight against number one all of a sudden and win?"

The sage, however, simply shrugged her shoulders and swept my objection aside.

"You can't spare any time to shiver over Bercouli alone. Like you've said, the grand total of integrity knights has reached thirty-one now."

There are another thirty masters stronger than Eldrie. Wanting to avert my eyes from the harsh reality, I spoke.

"Despite there being so many, I haven't seen a lot of them. I have only seen an integrity knight on a flying dragon in the night sky once ever since I came to the central capital."

"Naturally; the main duty of the integrity knights is the defense of the mountain range at the edge, after all. They would only be in the city when a major criminal who defied the Taboo Index appeared and that hasn't happened even once in these ten years. Normally, even the nobles and imperial families have no chance to see the integrity knights, let alone the rest of the populace. ...One could say that a distance was formed between them, however..."

"Hmm... Ah, but does that mean that the majority of the thirty knights are at the mountain range at the edge?"

I asked with a hint of anticipation, but Cardinal readily shook her head.

"I wouldn't say it's the majority. The number of knights awake within the cathedral right now should be, at the very least, twelve or thirteen. If you and Eugeo intend to complete your respective goals, you would generally have no choice but to break through them to reach the cathedral's top floor."

"Even if you say that... we have no choice..."

Sliding on the chair as I sank into depression, I let out a deep sigh.

To put it into RPG-ish terms, I'm feeling like I had just plunged into the last dungeon with absolutely none of the necessary equipment and levels. True, I made the far, far journey to the central capital so that I could struggle to the cathedral's top floor and contact someone in the real world, but I feel like I could honestly even say that the disparity in combat ability between the integrity knights and us was beyond hope.

I dropped my gaze to my chest in silence. Thanks to the magical meat bun I had gotten from Cardinal, the wound I had received from Integrity Knight

Eldrie's «armament full control art» had completely healed, but traces still remained in that spot, a stinging pain.

There would hardly be any chance of clearing it through frontal attacks alone if the knights appearing from now onwards were to be stronger than Eldrie... thinking about that, I recalled the curious incident after the end of the battle in the rose garden once more.

The integrity knight suddenly suffered pain upon being told his own history and the name of his mother by Eugeo, falling on his knees onto the ground. The transparent prism that rose out with purple light from his forehead while he was half-conscious— That was definitely the actual «Piety Module» Cardinal spoke of earlier. It was the key item used to alter the integrity knights' ego and memories, turning them into slaves absolutely loyal to the highest minister.

But was that effect really as absolute as Cardinal had said? Eldrie seemed like he would have been freed from the module's coercive force just by hearing his mother's name... from my point of view, at least. If the same phenomenon can develop on the other knights as well, that would mean there is another method aside from crossing swords with them head-on and open up the possibility of Eugeo's dear wish, «restoring Integrity Knight Alice to the original Alice», coming true.

Cardinal's calm voice reached my ears while I was sunk in my thoughts.

"There is a little more until the end of my story, may I continue?"

"...Ah, aah, please go ahead."

"Very well. —Now then, as Administrator had completed several integrity knights, starting from Bercouli, the chance of a surprise attack from me endlessly fell. Although they weren't at Administrator's level, the knights definitely had high offensive and defensive abilities, seeing as it was impossible for even me to instantaneously delete them. I had no choice but to resign myself to having our battle extended for all perpetuity..."

It seems Cardinal's long, long story was finally reaching its end. I straightened my posture atop the chair and focused on the sage's dignified tone.

"With the new change in the situation, it became clear that I, too, needed a collaborator. —However, finding one willing to fight the ruler of the world with me would be no easy task. You see, that person would first have to

possess a transgression quotient high enough to break the Taboo Index, as well as combat strength and sacred arts usage authority on par with the integrity knights on top of that. I risked the perils and opened a door as far as I could to use a different art, «consciousness sharing», upon the living birds and insects nearby and released them all over the whole world..."

"Ha-haa... So those were your eyes and ears, huh. Could that be how you observed me too...?"

"Indeed."

Cardinal gave a broad grin and reached out with her right hand. Facing the palm upwards, she curled her fingertips as though calling for someone. Upon which—

"Uwaah!?"

Some kind of small object suddenly jumped out from the area around my fringe, landing onto Cardinal's palm without a sound. When I took a look, it was a pitch-black spider smaller than even the fingertip of my little finger. Nimbly turning about, it looked up at me with the four deep-crimson eyes it had in front of its head and lifted its right foreleg, greeting me... or so it appeared.

"Her name is Charlotte. She has always been there observing the speech and behavior of both of you from your forelocks, the insides of your pocket, or even a corner of the room at times, ever since you left Rulid Village with Eugeo. ...It seems she did more than purely observing every now and then, however."

The spider retracted its eight legs and shrugged its tiny shoulders at Cardinal's chiding; or so it appeared.

I finally realized after those cute gestures. The one who tugged a strand of my forelocks and taught me the correct path to go while fleeing from the integrity knight riding on the flying dragon might possibly be this thing. No, it wasn't just that one time. I do recall that same sensation I felt countless times at the important times ever since I set out on a journey from Rulid, entered the swordsmanship tournament at Zakkaria and became a guard, even after I enrolled in the Sword Mastery Academy in the central.

"...So, that tugging thing wasn't some divine inspiration of mine, but because my hair was really being pulled on, huh..."

I recalled all of those scenes from one place or another as I murmured in a daze, before that final, and especially important memory came back to me. Unable to hold it back, I leaned forward and whispered to the black spider that wasn't even five millimeters in size, staying motionlessly on Cardinal's palm.

"Th-That's right, could it have been you that time too... were you the one who encouraged me when all those budding zephyrias I grew were cut...? The one who said to believe in the wishes of the surrounding flowers..."

The voice remaining in my memories was that of a somewhat adult woman. In that case, the black spider before my eyes might have the individuality of a female as the name, Charlotte, suggests, but could a bug that wasn't even human have a soul—a fluct light in the first place?

As I toyed around with my various doubts, Charlotte answered none of them and continued looking at me with her deep red eyes, but then abruptly got off Cardinal's palm, nimbly ran onto the table, and disappeared after jumping into a bookshelf nearby.

Having sent off the small familiar, Cardinal murmured in a gentle tone.

"Charlotte was the oldest observational unit I sent into the various lands of the Human World through art rituals. Her long, long duty had finally reached its end with this. The natural degeneration of her Life was frozen, so I suppose she had already worked for over two hundred years..."

"...Observational unit..."

Muttering so, I looked at the bookshelf Charlotte slipped into once again. There should have been nothing more to her duty than just observing Eugeo and me. However, in these two years since I left Rulid, Charlotte had pulled on my forelocks and whispered to me occasional advice, coming to my aid countless times. Thinking from a different perspective, she was a fellow traveler closer to me than even Eugeo was, even if I didn't notice her existence.

—Thank you.

Expressing my gratitude within my heart, I faced the bookshelf and lowered my head.

Turning my gaze back to Cardinal, I asked after a short moment of thought.

"So, in other words, you've... shut yourself up in this Great Library Room for over a whole two hundred years while searching for a human worthy of being a collaborator through the eyes and ears of familiars...?"

"Yes. I am unable to check out humans' transgression quotients directly from here, you see. Whenever gossip of peculiar incidents reach my ears, I have the observational units move there and observe the humans that caused it... I devoted myself to searching in that steadfast manner. Many times have I seen a human that caught my attention taken away by the integrity knights before my eyes. I may not possess emotions, but the knowledge of the meanings of the words, 'disappointment' and 'perseverance', were forced into me. ...Honestly speaking, the idea of soon getting acquainted with the meaning of the phrase, 'giving up', had occurred to me in these ten years or so."

A smile, with the weight of two hundred years behind it, drifted onto Cardinal's small lips.

"You see, while I sat and viewed the world, Administrator built up a more proactive system to ensure mighty warriors would become integrity knights. And that is the truth behind what you and Eugeo were aiming for, the «Four Empires Unity Tournament»."

"...So that means to say that the swordsmen that gained victory in the tournament did not take up the honor of being appointed as an integrity knight, but..."

"They were made into integrity knights, regardless of their will. The strongest puppets, with their prior memories sealed away and possessing blind obedience towards the highest minister. Families that contributed greatly to the number of the integrity knights were given monetary rewards, lavish enough to dazzle their eyes, and granted the status of upper class aristocrats, causing the unanimous opinion among parents of the nobles and wealthy merchants to have their children study the sword. And those knights themselves were posted to lands where contact with their original families was impossible, severing their connections with the past."

"...So what you meant by 'a distance forming between them' was..."

"Yes, that contrivance. —Among the thirty integrity knights, half were those arrested for committing a taboo, while the other half are all tournament champions. That Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-one who bruised you was one among them as well."

"I see... so that's how it works, huh..."

Letting out a gloomy sigh, I murmured.

So it was instead a stroke of luck, that Sortiliena-senpai, who I served as a valet, and Gorgolosso-senpai, who Eugeo served, had failed to achieve victory in the tournament this year. If Sortiliena-senpai had won against Eldrie and proceeded to become the tournament champion, then she would have been the one lying in wait at the rose garden plaza, as an integrity knight with her memories lost.

That wasn't all to it. If the case with Raios and Humbert hadn't happened and everything went how Eugeo and I had first aimed at, being elected as the academy representatives and successfully winning through the tournament next year... Or perhaps, if we had failed to escape from the underground jail and got dragged out to that interrogation place. It didn't matter to a natural fluct light like myself, but Eugeo had a high chance of ending up as the thirty-second integrity knight. This was what the saying, "go for wool and come back shorn", was meant for.

Cardinal spoke in a soft voice as my body shuddered.

"—Thus, in these more than two hundred years, Administrator steadily solidified her defenses and my hopes endlessly dwindled. Even I've considered it. About why I even had to bother with something like this..."

Those burnt-brown eyes gazed at the Great Library Room's high ceiling. Her two eyes flickered countlessly as though she saw a mirage of warm sunlight through that chilly stone dome.

"...The world I saw through the observers' eyes was beautiful and bathed in light. There were children having fun running around the grassy plains, girls blushing red with love, and mothers affectionately smiling upon the babies carried in their arms. If nothing had happened to the original owner of this body, that daughter of the furniture shop owner, as she grew up, would have received all of that. She should have been able to live an ordinary life, ignorant of the world's contrivances, and reminiscence about her blessed lifetime while on the brink of death as her family took care of her sixty, seventy years down the road..."

Was it a figment of my imagination that Cardinal, lowering her eyelashes as she stitched her words together in a whisper, gently shivered?

"...I resented the behavioral principle of correcting the main process's mistakes burnt into the core of my soul. And I decided that I was an old woman soon to die. A withered, old tree that had already lost all radiance of the living and purely awaits the moment its Life runs out. Strangely enough, my manner of speech had also turned out in this manner without my intent. In those ceaseless days of losing myself in the work of the humans through the borrowed ears of the familiars I released into the world, I continued thinking. Why did the gods from the outside world who created this one leave Administrator's tyranny alone...? Creation Goddess Stacia, Sun Goddess Solus, and Land Goddess Terraria are fabricated gods made by the Axiom Church for their rule, but the name of the true god, «Rath», can be spotted everywhere on the catalog that lists down every system command, after all. Rath is the collective name of the gods... and Cardinal is the false god created by them, without a soul, its existence made up by the two behavioral principles burnt into Administrator and myself. Questions about that world stacked up ever higher the more I knew of its secrets, without them ever being resolved."

"Wait... wait a moment."

Unable to follow the rapid development of the story, I cut into the conversation.

"Then... that thing about this world being a simulation created by Rath and that thing about the original Cardinal being a program with two processes, one main and one sub, were what you figured out through just conjecture too?"

"It's nothing to be surprised over. Anyone can reach that conclusion with two hundred years worth of time and the built-in database of the Cardinal System."

"Database... I see, so that's where you got that vocabulary of yours so different from those of the Underworld inhabitants, huh?"

"Along with the flavor of that corn soup you drank earlier. That said, there is probably much deviation between my understanding of many terms and yours... However, this guess, at the very least, is definitely accurate. The reason why Underworld is much too imperfect despite its roots in creationism and why Administrator's unsightly reign remains disregarded... there is only one possible reason left. The true god, Rath, does not wish for the humans in this world to lead happy lives. Instead, it is the opposite... this world exists purely for them to observe what sort of resistance the

inhabitants would put up as a humongous vise slowly, slowly clamps down upon them. —You might not know, but there has been an increase in deaths among humans unable to maintain their Lives due to causes such as endemic diseases, rampancy of dangerous beasts, and poor harvest of crops in the remote areas in recent years. This is a phenomenon brought about by the increase in the «load parameter» even Administrator is unable to change."

"Load... parameter? Now that you mention it, you said something like that earlier, didn't you. Some kind of load experiment or something."

"Yes. Strictly speaking, the load is still continuing day after day at the current moment, but... as recorded in the database, the trial that will appear in the final phase of the load experiment is incomparable to something minor like a disease."

"What exactly... will be happening...?"

"This egg, known as the Human World, held within the vise will finally have its shell broken. You know of it too, do you not, of what lies outside the Human World?"

"The Dark Territory...?"

"Exactly. That world of darkness is the device built in order to confer ultimate anguish upon the populace. I said so earlier, but those labeled as monsters of the darkness, the goblins, orcs, and other races are existences with the same fluct lights as humans, endowed with behavioral principles to slaughter and pillage. They are organized in a straightforward manner; a hierarchy where strength determines superiority, building up a primitive but powerful army. Their population may be half that of the Human World, but their individual combat ability is likely far beyond that of humans. That horrifying group is eagerly awaiting the day, that even the word, atrocious, will fail to describe, when they invade the territory of the people of the Human World who they call «ium» in their language. It's likely a tale not too far off in the future."

"An army..."

The topic provoked more than mere shivers. It would be no exaggeration to say that the goblin leader that participated in a struggle to the death with me in the cave in the mountain range at the edge, two years ago, was a ferocious fighter. Simply thinking about how a military with several thousands or several tens of thousands of those like him would come

marauding caused my blood to freeze. I shook my head falteringly as I spoke in a croaky voice.

"...The Human World have many guards and knights as well... but I won't mince my words, they have no chance of winning. They have absolutely no possibility of winning with that sort of swordsmanship in this world that focuses on artistic value..."

With that, Cardinal immediately replied with a nod.

"Obviously. ...Rath's plans likely had the Human World forming up a mighty army capable of opposing the Dark Territory right about now. Their usage authorities for equipment and sacred arts would increase through continuous battles against the minor but incessant raids of goblins, while working out swordsmanship styles and group tactics applicable for actual combat. However, as you know as well, that is far from the present situation. Swordsmen have never experienced actual combat, pursuing nothing but the ascetic appeal of their styles, and the army commanders, those upper class nobles, wallow in extravagance. This entire state of affairs has been brought about by Administrator and the integrity knights that she created."

"...What do you mean?"

"There is no doubt that integrity knights, with authorities of the highest level and sacred instrument-class equipment bestowed upon them, are powerful. Powerful enough to sweep away something on the level of those invading groups of goblins from the mountain range at the edge without any trouble, with merely eight of them guarding it. —However, due to that, the commoners who were originally supposed to fight those goblins ended up going through several hundreds of years without experiencing a single battle. The masses know nothing about the oncoming menace and live on immersed in the unending stagnation known as peace..."

"...Does Administrator know that the final phase of the load experiment will be beginning soon?"

"She ought to know. However, she underestimates the army of darkness, believing the thirty integrity knights and herself alone are capable of driving them away without a hitch. Her belief is so deep that she even had those guardian dragons in the north, south, east, and west, who were supposed to provide a valuable boost in war potential, massacred on the reasoning that she could not dominate their actions. It would likely sadden your

partner if he heard this; that the one who slaughtered the white dragon, a charming conversationalist in the legends, was Bercouli himself after being remodeled into an integrity knight."

"...It's best if he doesn't hear of that story."

I muttered so with a sigh. Recalling that mountain of bones I saw underground in the mountain range at the edge, I shut my eyes for a moment before lifting my face and asking.

"Realistically speaking, how would it turn out? When the army of darkness comes attacking, would Administrator and the integrity knights be able to go up against them alone?"

"It's impossible."

Cardinal promptly refuted.

"True, the integrity knights are experts who have experienced many years of actual combat, but their numbers are definitely too few and they would be overwhelmed. Also, the sacred arts Administrator commands have the strength of natural disasters, but as I have mentioned, she has to expose herself within the range of the enemies as well, to use those arts. Even if each individual of the army of darkness poses absolutely no match for Administrator, their sacred arts... no, perhaps I should call them dark arts instead, anyway, they have as many system command users as there are stars in the skies. Even if she were to incinerate a hundred art users with a deluge of lightning bolts, she would probably be pierced through in the next instant with a thousand flames. I wouldn't know if she would die with that enormous Life of hers, but at the very least, it is certain she would flee back to this tower."

"Hold... hold on for a bit, please. That means... the fate of this world won't change regardless of whether we defeat Administrator or not, doesn't it? You wouldn't be able to drive away the army of darkness even upon regaining all the authorities of the Cardinal System, would you?"

Cardinal affirmed the words, muttered by me in a daze, with a deep nod.

"It is exactly as you've said. I already have no methods left to stop the invasion from the Dark Territory with how far things have come."

"...In other words... as long as you complete your goal of eliminating Administrator, the malfunctioning main process... you wouldn't care one bit about what happens to this world... is that what you're saying...?"

"...That might be true."

The voice that finally let that out was faint enough to blend into the crackling of flames from the surrounding lamps.

"Yes... what I'm aiming for might be the same as letting things play out on their own if you look upon it as an end where many souls are extinguished... However... if either you or I sit here and do nothing, then soon... I do not know if it's a year ahead, or two, but it is certainly likely that the troops of darkness will march onwards into the Human World; then the villages will burn, the fields will be trampled, and many people will be murdered. The words known to me fail to express... just how extreme a disaster, just how overwhelmingly cruel the hell I fear shall make its appearance will be. —However, you see... even if I recover all of my authorities and work out a command that would burn the monsters of darkness to nothing in a single blow, I will not use it. If you are to ask for a reason, it will be because they didn't exactly desire to be monsters. I believe I mentioned this; that I couldn't reach an answer even after a hundred years of thinking. Listen here... even if a ruler like Administrator did not appear and the world continued down its originally planned track, the opposite would happen instead; the humans would have built up a mighty army, invaded the Dark Territory, and subjected the inhabitants of that country to the limits of atrocity as they massacred them to the very end!"

Cardinal's soft voice gradually carried a sharpness like that of a whip and assaulted my ears with a snap.

"Regardless of which one falls, the end of the world will be soaked in an abominable amount of blood. After all, that end itself is what the god, Rath, desired. I... I cannot accept a god like that. I definitely cannot accept such an ending. As such... upon realizing that I was unable to avert the load experimental phase's approach, I arrived at a single conclusion. No matter what it takes, I will remove Administrator before that time comes, recover my authorities as the Cardinal System... and render everything in the Underworld null, both the Human World and the Dark Territory."

"Render... null...?"

Mechanically repeating the words, my eyes opened, feeling as though it was their first time doing so.

"What exactly do you mean...?"

"It is just as I said. I will delete every fluct light stored within the cradle of souls, the Light Cube Cluster. The inhabitants of the Human World, and the inhabitants of darkness as well, without leaving behind a single one."

A firm determination and resolution filled Cardinal's youthful face with her declaration, sealing my mouth away for a while. After spending some time, I could somehow conceptualize a definite image for that final solution the girl's words pointed towards.

"That's... essentially, if an end where many people die in a cruel and painful way can't be avoided, it would be better to just perform euthanasia on everyone...?"

"Euthanasia...? —No, that would be the wrong term to use."

Perhaps searching through the database built into the system, Cardinal blinked once before she shook her head.

"It is probably unimaginable for a human of the host world like yourself, possessing a cognizance media different from the light cube, but the souls of the inhabitants living in this world can be deleted with a moment of manipulation. They can disappear without even enough resistance to make a flame on a candle waver, without them noticing a thing... That is no different from the deed of murdering a person in the first place, but..."

It was probably a conclusion she considered thoroughly over a long period of time; I could feel nothing but reverberations filled with profound resignation and futility in Cardinal's voice as she spoke.

"Of course, ideally speaking, the best way would be for this world itself to escape from Rath's grasp forever, writing its own, original history. It's not impossible to have a bloodless reconciliation between the Human World and the Dark Territory by spending a few hundred years duration on it. However... you should be the one most aware of how much of a pipe dream it is, to become independent of the god, Rath, shouldn't you?"

I bit my lips and pondered the sudden inquiry.

I do not know where in Japan the true form of Underworld in the real world was, where the huge Light Cube Cluster was set up. However, naturally,

the cluster and its paired machines consume a whole lot of electricity, so implementing complete independence is clearly impossible in that sense.

Adding to that, Rath was not managing Underworld as a charity enterprise. Kikuoka Seijirou was actually a member of the Self Defense Force and if my suspicion of his deep connections to the founding of Rath proves right, this experiment should have some tangible aim involving national security. Even if Cardinal recovered all her authorities and opened a communication channel to the outside, requesting for Underworld's independence, there shouldn't be any possibility for those in Rath to accept that.

Yes—thinking back about it, even if I managed to reach the top floor of the Central Cathedral and contact Kikuoka, there was utterly no guarantee that he would listen to my plea of preserving the Underworld as it is by interacting with Eugeo. All of the artificial fluct lights are plain experiment subjects to Rath and in the first place, the current Underworld is itself nothing more than a single instance of multiple trial runs.

To put it in other words, there is probably only one method if the artificial fluct lights wish to attain true freedom and independence—to challenge the humans of the real world.

Apprehensive about thinking what laid beyond that, I forced my thoughts to a standstill. Raising my face, I looked at Cardinal, then forced my stiff neck into a nod.

"...Yeah, it's impossible. This world's much too reliant on humans and energy from the outside world for independence."

"Yes.. to give an example, it would be like a shoal of fish, thrown into a bucket and capable of doing nothing but wait to be deep-fried in a pot... The most they could do is to hurl themselves out and die."

I couldn't simply nod back at Cardinal, murmuring so in a voice filled with resignation, however.

"But... I can't agree with that so thoroughly, though it's not like I'm completely against it... The solution you propose, to disappear in an instant without feeling a thing rather than suffering and dying, might be the right one to take. But I've already become too involved with the humans in this world to admit that."

The smiling faces of the people I had closely mingled with in Rulid and Centoria floated past one after another in my mind. Of course, I have no

desire to see them slaughtered by the forces of the Dark Territory, but even so, was cooperating with Cardinal in this way and making everyone's souls vanish the best and only method?

Unable to deal with the reality abruptly thrust at me, I bit my lips and listened to Cardinal's soothing voice.

"Kirito, if all of my authorities are restored with your assistance, I will grant your wishes, though for a limited time, before terminating the Underworld. If you specify the names of those you wish to help, I will not erase their fluct lights, leaving them in an archived state. Afterward, you merely have to secure the light cubes containing their souls when you escape to the outer world. I can still work something out if it is only ten. Even if this is not the best choice for you, it should still qualify for second best."

"......!"

I drew in a sharp breath of air at the sudden, unexpected words.

Would something like that really be possible?

True, if the light cube don't require electricity to retain information and I manage to take them out from the cluster, safely preserving them, the fluct lights within should never deteriorate. It would take time, but it shouldn't be impossible to «extract» and meet them again when the STL technology goes mainstream someday.

However, the problem lies with the stage before that, the way to steal several cubes from the Light Cube Cluster, likely set up at the heart of the Rath research facility. I can't hide many in my pockets if the light cube is a cube with sides of five centimeters, as Cardinal described. Even if I use a handy case, it would certainly take all I had to carry ten out.

In other words, if I went with this proposal, I would have to select the souls to be saved.

It was different from sorting out save data on a household game console. Artificial fluct lights were basically humans, exactly like myself. I can choose to rescue a mere ten people from an unavoidable death. And that was only due to their intimacy with me. Do I truly hold the qualification and right for such a deed?

"It's... it's..."

Impossible for me; that would have been what my words led to, but they stayed within my mouth and I simply stared at Cardinal's eyes that felt as though they could see through anything and everything. What came out instead, was an extremely pathetic lament.

"—In the first place, why did you choose me as your collaborator in fighting Administrator? I'll tell you first, but I really don't hold any actual advantage in this world. Sacred arts, sword skill, there's plenty who are better, scattered all around. That's right... for example, even Eugeo would do fine. I probably wouldn't win if he were to fight me seriously now."

Having patiently heard my pessimistic protest to its conclusion, Cardinal shook her head solely in exasperation.

She filled the cup atop the table, this time with kohiru tea—or so it appeared, but it might be real coffee—then took a sip.

"...I realized the load experimental phase, or the invasion of the Dark Territory in other words, was no longer avoidable only a mere twenty years or so ago. Since then, I've been seeking for one who would become my sword much more desperately than before..."

Likely reaching the final chapter at last, the long, long story resumed, and I swallowed my lament and listened attentively.

"...However, no matter how much of an expert in the sword or sacred arts I gain as an ally, that person would need to clear another huge obstacle to approach Administrator herself, putting her escorts, the integrity knights, aside."

"...I-Is there still something else...?"

"Yes. While I was conducting my search, I figured out over tens of ways to solve that other problem, but each one of them lacked a certain reliability... Time continued flowing as I hurried and incessant groups of vanguards were already endangering the mountain range at the edge from the Dark Territory as the first phase of the load experiment when I noticed. Their numbers were enough for the eight integrity knights deployed to fail in eliminating them all. —It was when I began thinking that I had to give up on restoring my authorities through battle and consider persuading Administrator, even if it meant offering my neck, with things the way they were then... a familiar I released got wind of a story circulating around, of what could be thought as an impossible tale, in the remote northern region."

"Impossible tale...?"

"A rumor concerning a phenomenon that had never occurred even once ever since Quinella became Administrator, at least. It was one about the hindering objects that woman set in every land of the world to obstruct the expansion of residential boundaries for the humans... how one of them, a gigantic tree that absorbed resources from the air with a vast expanse, possessing a ridiculous priority and durability, had been chopped down by merely two youngsters."

"......I feel like I've heard that somewhere..."

"I made haste to move the familiar stationed at the northern region of Norlangarth, that is, Charlotte, and searched for those youngsters. It was immediately before they set out from the village when I finally found them. I slipped Charlotte onto the head of one of them for the moment, a rather careless fellow, and investigated why they were able to eliminate an object that was nearly impossible to destroy..."

I thought of saying something in return to being treated as a rather careless fellow, but I really didn't notice Charlotte riding on my head for over two years, so I couldn't even muster a noise in argument. I urged Cardinal to proceed with a scowl.

"I found out exactly why straight away. The sword held by the flaxen-haired youngster was of a class that the world had few of, one of the sacred instruments... However, a new doubt surfaced upon even understanding that. Why did these youngsters possess such a high object control authority? Experiencing an excitement that I haven't felt for a long time, I pricked my ears to the pair's conversations, day and night. Most were foolish talk of absolutely no use, however..."

"So-Sorry about that."

"Ugh, keep quiet and listen. —Before very long, I finally understood the reason in a town while on the way to the central capital. Astonishingly enough, that would imply that the pair drove away a larger-sized scout unit from the Dark Territory by themselves, didn't it? If that proved to be true, the enormous amount of authority increase points, normally divided between ten people, would have been monopolized between those two. I understood that was the reason behind why they gained a high enough authority to equip sacred instruments, but... at the same time, yet another new question tormented me. That is—how could youngsters, born in some

remote village who weren't even part of the guard corps, repel goblin warriors of the Dark Territory who possessed overwhelming fighting ability? That sums it up."

"Just saying, but ninety percent of that was through theatrics."

Cardinal seemed to want to scold me for interfering again, then changed her mind, closed her mouth, and slowly nodded.

"Yes... indeed, that was likely part of what caused that result. That doubt was cleared up in the end, but it was the only one to take such a long time. You see, the black-haired one... that is, you Kirito, were careful and paid attention to your speech and behavior towards your partner, Eugeo. However, understanding hit me like a flash of lightning in the end, at the moment I saw you giving leftovers to a beast not raised by anyone, in other words, a stray dog. You were not bound by the Taboo Index at all..."

"...Did I really do something like that...?"

"Countless times. It would had been chaos if someone else saw. —Since then, I analyzed the significance behind your speech and actions through Charlotte's eyes. Constantly, even after the two of you reached the central capital and passed through the entrance of the North Centoria Sword Mastery Academy. It was over a year after I started observing... when I finally arrived at a single answer. In short, you are not a soul born in this world and confined within a light cube but a human from the outside... a human from the world where the true creation god, Rath, resides..."

"—Then I must have disappointed you. After all, I didn't have the supervisor rights I would typically have, not to mention how I didn't even have a method to communicate with Rath... why, I don't even know what's happening outside right now..."

I spoke, feeling sorry for being so little help, and Cardinal shook her right index finger with mild laughter.

"I knew that from the very beginning. After all, if you had a system authority above Administrator's, there would be no need for you to defeat the goblins with a sword, suffering such a deep injury in the process. I, too, am unable to infer the reason why you have appeared in the Underworld in a state like this. I guess it was perhaps due to some sort of accident... or maybe collecting data with your memories, knowledge, and authorities restricted; I would be amazed if you weren't paid a rather enormous compensation for it if it was the latter, however."

"...Yeah, no kidding. I wouldn't know what to think about myself if that was it."

Recalling the pain from the goblin leader gouging my left shoulder, I muttered.

"Regardless, you are still the greatest hope I could wish for. After all, your very existence cleared the other significant barrier in the battle against Administrator I spoke of earlier."

"What exactly is that barrier supposed to be?"

"—Executing the Synthesis Ritual requires a long command and extensive adjusting of parameters. Inclusive of the preparation stage, it needs approximately three days."

The story abruptly skipped ahead once again and I was bewildered. But Cardinal's lips continued to move, showing no acknowledgment of that on her face.

"In short, there is nearly no need to take sacred arts that can access a light cube directly into account for a normal battle. To put it another way, there is no danger of your soul being overtaken and brainwashed into an integrity knight in the midst of battle. However—what if Administrator gave up on capturing the warrior I chose and simply tried to blow the soul away...? The necessary command should rapidly shorten along with the lack for meticulous adjustments of the parameters. It might even shorten to the extent of letting her finish reciting it while her escorts battled. I can compensate for attacks based on Life with equipment and sacred arts as well. However, there is no defense against an attack towards the fluct light itself. I racked my mind for a long time when I realized that possibility."

"...An attack on the soul... that's pretty nasty..."

"Yes. Any sort of master would be rendered powerless with his or her memories torn away... As such, Kirito, you are the only one capable of confronting that attack. As expected, even Administrator cannot lay her hands on the sacred instrument of the outside world, the «STL», that you use to move your soul to the Underworld. Because there is no such command in existence. Do you understand the reason behind me being so set on waiting for you now? The reason why I have set down the maximum amount of backdoors and continued waiting so intently, in order to bring you into the Great Library Room when you win the Unity Tournament... or perhaps, before you got dragged into the interrogation area after stepping

onto the Axiom Church's grounds as a criminal who violated the Taboo Index...?"

At last, the long, excessively long self-biographical story had come to its end at the present point in time, and Cardinal took a deep breath as a faint blush spread over her cheeks.

"...I see, so that's the state of affairs..."

I still didn't know the reason behind my diving into the Underworld with things as they were. Rather, I instead say that it was to find that out that I set out for the core of the world, the Axiom Church where I thought the only communication method with Rath would exist at, as my goal.

However, I couldn't help but think that struggling all the way here to this place really was predestined when this girl, who had lived through an absurd length of time, clearly declared so. Was this an oracle for me to try putting in all my effort with Cardinal and letting some people escape to the real world, despite it being only ten, with the unguaranteed success of the battle against Administrator—?

No, before bringing up fate or whatever else, I couldn't find it in me to refuse the girl before my eyes, who earnestly waited for this very moment for two hundred years. She reiterated that she was an emotionless program countless times, but I do not believe that to be the truth from what I've heard in her long, long story. Cardinal, too, ought to be a human possessing human emotions just like me. All the more so, even if she was bound by an order, her one and only wish—of correcting the world.

"How about it, Kirito. I cannot force you... if you cannot approve of my plan to return the world to null, I'll send Eugeo and you out from a backdoor in any position of your liking. In that situation, you would both have to overcome all the difficulties to defeat Administrator, which would then likely lead to a battle with me after you've accomplished your respective goals, but... all I can say is that that, too, is fate..."

Murmuring so, Cardinal then showed a distinct smile, one that appeared the most appropriate for her age among her various expressions ever since she invited us into this library room.

After a long period of silence, I replied to the girl's question with one of my own.

"Cardinal... Your soul's a copy of Quinella, that was what you said, right...?"

"Yes, that is the case indeed."

"Then... you should have the blood of pure nobles running through you too. The genes to pursue one's own interests and desires are... Why did you not throw everything away and try to flee? It should be possible for you to run away to some small village, so far away that not even Administrator can track you, and fall in love, get married, and bring up children like an ordinary girl... maybe even die from old age in bliss. Wasn't that your wish? Your blood should be commanding you to follow your desires... constantly, for these two hundred years. Why did you resist that command and continue waiting for over two hundred years in a place like this by yourself...?"

"You are a foolish one, through and through."

Cardinal grinned.

"I said it, that all my interests and desires are just one due to the purpose of the Cardinal sub-process's existence burnt into my soul, to eliminate Administrator and normalize the world. In my mind, a normalized world can no longer be achieved without sending it back to utter nothingness. As such— As such, I—"

There was an abrupt pause in her words, so I stared into Cardinal's spectacles. The widely opened burnt-brown eyes appeared to be shivering intensely, perhaps due to restraining some sort of emotion. Soon, those lips moved and a voice so soft I almost couldn't hear it escaped.

"...No... I suppose that's wrong... I, too... I, too, have a wish; a single one... Something I wanted to understand at any cost... in these two hundred years..."

Her eyelids closing and lifting up once again, Cardinal stared at me intently. She bit her lips in a rare show of hesitation and held her hands together for a bit, but then suddenly got off the chair and stood onto the floor with a thump.

"Hey, Kirito, you get up too."

"Hah...?"

I got up as I was told to. Cardinal leaned quite a bit to look up at me, standing upright with my head inclined in doubt. I didn't have that much in terms of height, but still, it differed quite a lot from the girl who held an outer appearance of one around ten years old.

Cardinal frowned as she scanned through our surroundings, placed her right leg onto the chair she had sat on until now, and got up with some effort. Turning about, she nodded as though checking if the levels of our eyes were roughly aligned.

"There we go. Hey, Kirito, come over here."

"...?"

Still confused about the situation, I took several steps and stood in front of Cardinal.

"More to the front."

"Eeh?"

"Stop complaining."

What's the matter, I wondered as I advanced bit by bit. "That's enough" by the time I got told that, our forelocks were practically already touching each other. Cardinal gazed at my eyes with a glance, as I sweated cold perspiration, and immediately looked away, receiving another order.

"Spread out your arms."

"......Like this?"

"Turn them in front and make a ring."

"........."

Surely, she wouldn't bash me up with the staff, or anything like that, the moment I followed her instructions— in trepidation, I slowly moved my arms, avoiding Cardinal's body, and linked my left and right fingertips together at a spot quite far away from her back.

After spending several seconds filled with such an awkward silence, Cardinal made a slightly cute click with her tongue.

"Ugh, bashful, aren't you?"

Are you referring to me; I barely got anywhere before I stopped that line midway.

Her robe split open, Cardinal's two arms timidly went around my back as well and I could feel her exerting an extremely mild strength through the fabric of my coat. The huge hat that collided with my forehead made a noise as it dropped onto the table and her chestnut-colored, curly hair brushed against my left cheek. A subtle weight and a faint heat could be felt on my shoulders and chest.

"....."

Having endured all I could of this in a silence that was becoming heavier, I tried to ask for the reason behind this situation. However, before I could, Cardinal's almost inaudible voice meekly swayed out into the Great Library Room's atmosphere.

"I see... so this is..."

Following a long, deep sigh—

"...So this is what it means to be human?"

My breath was taken away in that instant.

If there was something that Cardinal wanted to know in the end, after spending two hundred years in isolation pondering about everything, there would obviously be no other answer except contact with another human, wouldn't it?

The word, human, takes its roots from connections between people[3]. Being human means to exchange words with another; to take each others' hands in their own; to feel the contact between souls.

Despite that, this girl had gone through two hundred years of time by herself, surrounded by books incapable of a single line of conversation.

I could finally palpably grasp the time Cardinal had lived through, with a certain degree of reality. At the same time, I moved my left and right arms, firmly pulling the girl's back towards me.

"...Warm..."

There was something decisively different somewhere in that particular voice from all of Cardinal's other voices thus far, sighing as it murmured.

I also could feel small yet distinct drops of water in that moment, carrying heat as they gently traveled across my cheeks.

"...Rewarded... at last... these two hundred years of mine... were not in vain..."

The teardrops flowed, drop followed by another, before disappearing somewhere.

"I'm satisfied... just knowing this warmth... this is plenty, for a reward..."

I did not know how long we stayed that way for sure, but my stomach already felt empty when that gentle shift in the atmosphere occurred.

Getting down from the chair, Cardinal picked up her knocked-over hat and patted it before placing it on her head. Pushing her round glasses up as she looked this way, that face of hers had already regained the presence of an aloof sage.

"How much longer do you plan on standing in a daze?"

"...That's just too much..."

Mumbling a protest against those words that made me think the tears earlier were a delusion, I took a seat at the table's edge. Cardinal silently waited as I crossed my arms and took a long breath but plainly asked the final question before long.

"—So, have you reached a conclusion? Will you take up my proposal, or refuse it?"

"....."

I, unfortunately, did not happen to possess enough decisiveness for an immediate answer.

Going by logic alone, selecting ten who should be saved and borrowing Cardinal's assistance to escape to the real world would be the greatest outcome I could hope for—that was how it was, I guess. After all, I couldn't formulate any better alternatives in my current state.

But it wasn't like none existed just because I couldn't think of any. I want to believe that. Hence, upon lifting my face, I stared straight at Cardinal and spoke.

"...Got it. I'll participate in your strategy. But..."

As if squeezing out each word, one at a time, I continued on.

"But I won't stop thinking. Even when we start fighting against the integrity knights and Administrator from now on, I'll continue searching for some other method. A solution that will somehow avert the load experimental phase tragedy and allow the world's peace to last."

"Dear me, you're ridiculously optimistic, aren't you. I already knew that, though."

"Well, you see... I don't want you to disappear either. If you told me to choose ten people, you'll be included in there, make no mistake about that."

Cardinal immediately shrouded those eyes, opened wide for a sheer instant, in the shade of derision and shook her head in exaggerated motions.

"...And on top of that, you're foolish. If I were to escape, who would be the one to erase this world?"

"Like I said... I understand the circumstances, but I won't abandon the futile struggle, that's all I'm saying."

Shaking her head in pure exasperation at my excuse-like words, the sage spun around turning her back to me. The voice delivered on the gentle wind caused by the fluttering robe was thoroughly quiet, hiding a two hundred years isolation that was utterly impossible for a brief moment of contact to bury.

"A day shall come when you, too... taste the bitterness of resignation... Not a time when you give it your all and fail... one where you need to accept the premise of failure... —Now, let's return. It is likely that your partner will finish reading the history books soon. Let us discuss concrete details for our plans from now on together with Eugeo."

Ringing her staff onto the stone floor, Cardinal turned to where we came from and started to walk, without taking a single look at me.

Part 2

As Cardinal judged, Eugeo had just closed a massive book placed on his lap as he sat in the middle of the stairs when we returned to the history books corridor.

I called out to him while walking closer, his eyes wandering about in a daze as if he hadn't yet woken up from the historical reports spanning hundreds of years.

"That took a while. Sorry about making you wait all alone."

Eugeo's back suddenly trembled at that and he distinctively blinked multiple times for some reason, then finally looked at me.

"Ah... aah, Kirito. How long has it been...?"

"Eh? Erm..."

I looked around in a fluster, but there wasn't a single window around, let alone a clock. Cardinal softly cleared her throat and answered in my place.

"It has been roughly two hours, the sun is completely up in the sky now. —How was it, the long history of the Human World?"

"Hmm... how should I say this...?"

When asked, Eugeo endlessly chewed on his lips as though searching for the words, then muttered in an indecisive tone.

"...Did everything written in this book actually happen? It's like... reading a series of well-written fairy tales... You see, most of the episodes go like, some kind of problem occured at so-and-so place, then integrity knights arrive and solve the problem, and ever since then, a new such-and-such clause was added to the Taboo Index... it was filled with such stories."

"There's no helping it, those are historical facts, after all. A net with water poured and spilling through, and its gaps stitched up one after another; that's the sort of organization the Axiom Church is."

Cardinal practically spat those words out, making Eugeo widen his eyes. That was only natural; it was probably the first time he met a person who gave such straight criticism of the church, not to mention she was a girl in her tender years—though of course, that was only what she appeared on the outside.

"Er... erm, may I ask who are...?"

"Aah, she's called Cardinal. Err... she was banished by the existing highest minister, Administrator, and was once a highest minister herself as well."

After I gave that summarized introduction, Eugeo gulped, making an odd noise from the back of his throat as he drew away.

"No, there's no need to be scared. It seems like she's willing to help us out even though we're going to fight those integrity knights."

"Hel... help us out...?"

"Yeah. This person's goal is to defeat Administrator and get reinstated as the highest minister, you see. So... well, we decided to form an alliance."

There was definitely no lies in that tremendously simplified explanation, but I really couldn't bring myself to approach that conclusion where erasure awaits all of the Underworld inhabitants upon Cardinal regaining her authorities. I would probably have to discuss it with Eugeo someday, but still, I didn't have the foggiest idea how I could broach the subject.

As though clad in obedience, my partner stared at Cardinal without a single tinge of distrust in his eyes and gave a nervous smile.

"Is that so... that would be a great help, really. If she was once the highest minister, then would she know if Alice... the integrity knight, Alice Synthesis Thirty, was the same person as Alice Schuberg of Rulid? ...If she does... how about a method to return Alice to how she once was too...?"

Cardinal lowered her eyelashes just a little at the question Eugeo asked in a faltering speech.

"I apologize, but... the information I can get a hold of from this place is extremely limited. Basically, I would not know any more than the affairs my not-too-abundant numbers of familiars observe. I might still know if it was an incident within the cathedral or the central part of Centoria but one from as far as the remote regions would simply be... I am aware of the birth of an integrity knight named Alice, but I am utterly ignorant of her origins at this current point in time..."

Eugeo's shoulders slightly slumped upon hearing thus far but he sharply took in a breath of air with the words that followed.

"—However, I can teach you the method to revoke the sacred art to give birth to, no, produce an integrity knight, the «Synthesis Ritual»."

Cardinal looked at Eugeo and me in turn, then spoke in a stately tone.

"You simply have to remove the «Piety Module» inserted into their souls."

"Pahy... moju...?"

I added some side information for Eugeo, repeating the unfamiliar words from English, no, the Sacred Tongue with difficulty.

"Module, er, carries the meaning of 'component' in the Sacred Tongue. Look, you saw it when we fought with Integrity Knight Eldrie in the rose garden, right? When that guy turned strange halfway through and all..."

"Aah... the thing that looked like a purple crystal rod coming out from his forehead..."

"Indeed, that's exactly it."

Carrying the staff in her right hand, Cardinal drew a horizontal line in midair with its end, then moved it as though to cut the line near its middle.

"The Piety Module is inserted in a way that would obstruct the links between memories. Through that, it seals away the history of the one who would become an integrity knight, simultaneously forcing an absolute loyalty towards the Axiom Church and highest minister. —However, the stability of a coercive and complex art like this is not high. If the important memories around the module are roused through external stimulation, the art will start to unravel as the both of you have witnessed."

"In other words... to dispel the art, we'll just have to jolt the integrity knight's past memories, that's how it works?"

I asked with high hopes, but Cardinal didn't nod.

"No... that is not enough by itself. There is one more thing, another something you will require."

"Wh-What is that?"

Eugeo was the one to lean forward this time.

"What originally existed where the module was inserted. In other words, the memory fragment most valued by the integrity knight. Ordinarily, recollections of the one they most loved would be there. Do you remember what words that integrity knight you fought reacted to the most?"

Eugeo answered before I could dig through my memories.

"Yes. It was the name of his mother. The crystal looked like it would fall out with just a little more when he heard that."

"Then that was likely it. The memories extracted from Eldrie were related to his mother, that is where the module was embedded. You see, although none of the integrity knights' past memories serve any importance to Administrator in the first place, memory and ability are deeply connected. If all of their memories were to be erased, their strength as a knight... they would lose even their secret swordsmanship moves and sacred arts techniques. Hence, she refrained from obstructing the flow of their

memories. I deleted the majority of my memories to prolong my life, but I lost much of the knowledge and ability attained in that period of time as well..."

Taking a short breath, Cardinal added on.

"...I'll say this again, that all of the integrity knights have had their most important memory fragments stolen by Administrator. Unless you retrieve those, the flow of their memories will not return to how they were originally, even if you remove the piety module. In the worst case scenario, their very memories might get severely damaged."

"Memory fragments... Th-Then... what if Administrator breaks what she drew out from the knights...?"

I nervously asked and Cardinal slowly shook her head with a complicated expression.

"No... I doubt that. Administrator is a meticulous woman, it's unlikely for her to break anything even the least bit useful. There ought to be no mistake that she would first keep it safe in her own room... on the top floor of the Central Cathedral..."

The top floor of the cathedral—a part of my memories pricked awake the moment I heard those words, but it vanished before I could grab hold of it. Feeling a queer irritation, I mumbled.

"So that means... we'll need the stolen memory fragments to return the integrity knights to how they were, but we'll have to break through the knights' guard and reach the top floor, where Administrator is, to get our hands on those, huh..."

"Don't get any naive ideas of gaining victory over the integrity knights without killing."

Cardinal spoke while giving me a fleeting glare.

"All I may do for you both is to provide equipment equivalent to that of the integrity knights. The rest depends on the both of you putting in all you have into fighting."

"Eh... you aren't coming along with us?"

Having expected that we would definitely have a reassuring support at our backs with an infinite stock of healing magic, I replied without thinking. But Cardinal curtly shook her head.

"If I were to leave the Great Library Room, Administrator would immediately sense that and the situation would likely develop into an all-out war against all of the integrity knights within the cathedral and that woman herself. If the two of you have the confidence to fight and defeat ten integrity knights concurrently however, I wouldn't mind; so?"

There was nothing more Eugeo and I could do but shake our heads left and right at her cruel way of asking.

"—However, Administrator has not discarded her plan for capturing both of you and making you two into integrity knights just yet. If you two were to go by yourselves, she should send only a small number of knights and try to capture both of you alive. There is no other method aside from breaking through those knights one after another and running up the cathedral."

"Mgh..."

True, we should split the enemies up even if it meant using ourselves as decoy if we're up against opponents with superior numbers. But even if that worked out, the other side were integrity knights, the strongest in the world. We had a hard fight against Eldrie alone, so I couldn't help but think about giving up if two were to come at us.

While I sank into silence, Eugeo spoke on my behalf with a somewhat dismal light in his eyes.

"—Understood. I'll fight if we need to, and if there's no choice but to kill... I won't avoid that either. I did break out from prison with that resolution from the start... However, if Alice were to appear...? I will not fight with Alice, I came all the way here to take her back, after all."

"Fm... that's true. Eugeo, I sympathize with your goal as well. —Very well, if Integrity Knight Alice stands in your way, you would do well to use this."

Cardinal said, and took out what appeared to be two extremely small daggers from her black robe.

They had a simple form, as though someone had simply sharpened the longer protrusion of a cross to a point. Their only embellishment was a thin chain that passed through a hole in the pommel. Cardinal handed both

Eugeo and I one of the daggers each that gleamed a deep brown. I accepted it, pinching the exceedingly thin handle between my fingertips, and almost dropped it due to its unexpected weight. Its entire length didn't even reach twenty centimeters, but the resistance I felt was not much different from that of the practice swords in the Sword Mastery Academy.

"What is this...? Some secret weapon that kills in a single hit or something?"

Putting my finger through the chain, I gazed at the dagger dangling before my face as I asked, and Cardinal curtly shook her head.

"The dagger itself has practically no offensive ability, as its appearance suggests. However, an inseverable path will be connected between myself, in the Great Library Room, and the one stabbed by it. In other words, the various sacred arts I can use will affect the target. After all, that originally was a part of myself. —Eugeo, dodge Integrity Knight Alice's attacks and stab that into her body somewhere, the position is of no concern. It would barely reduce any Life. In that instant, I will lead Alice into a deep sleep with my arts... until the two of you can retrieve the girl's memories and ready the preparations for the Synthesis removal."

"Deep... sleep..."

It appeared Eugeo was divided between whether or not to believe in it as he stared hard at the brown dagger on his palm. He definitely still felt reluctance at hurting Alice, even with a weapon even more flimsy than a paper knife.

I gently pat my partner's back and spoke.

"Eugeo, let's trust this person. If you think about it, we would have to make Alice faint or something like that if we were to cross swords with her and we definitely won't be able to avoid getting hurt pretty bad, with the same going for her. In comparison, getting pricked with a dagger like this would just be like getting stung by a large marsh horsefly."

"...That bug doesn't sting humans, though."

Perhaps his mood had recovered, as Eugeo corrected my thoughtless words like we were in the academy, then turned back to Cardinal.

"Understood. Allow me to make use of this if I am unable to persuade Alice, then."

Grasping the dagger tightly within his palm, he bowed deeply as though to convince himself. I breathed a sigh of relief as well, looking at the cross-shaped dagger dangling from my right hand.

"...Cardinal, you said that this dagger was a part of you earlier, didn't you? What did you mean by that?"

Cardinal shrugged her shoulders lightly at my inquiry.

"Even if Administrator and I are able to generate each and every object, it's not like we're producing them from nothing."

"Hah...?"

"The world has limited resources. You should understand that from how the farmland could not be cultivated around the Gigas Cedar that the two of you chopped down, shouldn't you? In the same manner, if I were to create an object possessing a certain priority, I would have to sacrifice an existence equal to that. When I previously had the chance to battle Administrator, she created a sword, and me, a staff—but in that instant, every single one of the valuable treasures within that room vanished, hehe."

Cardinal tapped the staff in her right hand onto the stone floor and failed to suppress a somewhat happy chuckle escaping from her.

"—However, as you can see, the Great Library Room is a sealed space. Even if I try to create a high priority weapon, there are no objects for an equivalent exchange. The immeasurable amount of books could, well, be said to be valuable, but that applies solely to their content, so... I thought of using this staff as well, but it is necessary in the battle against Administrator, which clearly narrows what could be used as compensation to one, nothing but my own body. This body of mine is certainly valuable; it belongs to the one with the highest authority in the world, after all."

"Bo..."

"Body...?"

Eugeo and I instinctively examined Cardinal's slender body from head to toe. I immediately noticed how rude it was and averted my eyes, but I did confirm that the girl had all four limbs at the current moment. After swallowing my words countless times, I timidly opened my mouth.

"...Th-That is... to say that you cut off part of that body, converted it to an object, then regenerated that part...?"

"Dolt, nothing would have been sacrificed in that case. This is it."

After turning her head to face the side, Cardinal twirled and flicked the extremely short bundles of chestnut-colored, curly hair tied at both sides of her slender nape.

"Ah, aah... I see, so it was your hair..."

"The compensation for one dagger was one of these, grown for two hundred years. I could have shown it off before it was cut if the two of you had come earlier."

She said so jokingly, but the fleeting shade of sadness that surfaced in her eyes proved that Cardinal still remained a girl, even if a part of her had been used as a base material.

But that fragment of sentimentality instantly disappeared into the depths of her sage-like attitude.

"—With those reasons stated, each of those daggers may appear small in stature but they possess a sharpness and endurance capable of piercing an integrity knight's armor. Furthermore, they are able to connect a path through the space of nothingness surrounding the Great Library Room as they are still a part of my body in a certain sense. ...I originally created them to deal with Administrator. Kirito, I'll have you stab yours into her body after dodging those mighty attacks of hers. One was meant as a spare, but oh well, you will simply have to succeed on the first try."

"Ugh... a heavy responsibility, huh..."

I finally noticed after taking another look at the dagger swaying under my right hand. That the deep-brown gleam matched the color of the curly hair peeking out from the edge of Cardinal's hat.

Eugeo seemed to have understood the value of the dagger given to him, despite being stumped at the explanation jumbled with Sacred Tongue words, and nervously opened his mouth.

"Er-Erm... is it really alright? Letting me use one of these daggers for Alice, even though there are only two...?"

"I do not mind. And at any rate..."

Cardinal held in the words that followed and looked at me, her eyes seemingly to see through to my inner thoughts perfectly.

Yes, at any rate, Cardinal's assistance in removing Alice's brainwashing was required for the fluct lights of ten people, including Eugeo and Alice, to escape to the real world. It was probably better to recover Alice before explaining that situation to Eugeo. Even Eugeo might agree to escape this world, accompanied by a person precious to him. No, I would have to make him accept it, no matter what means I would have to resort to.

Feeling ashamed for already unwittingly taking Cardinal's world annihilation plan as a given, I tightly squeezed the thin chain. Yes... there might be no other path aside from the Underworld vanishing. But even so, I wish to include Cardinal herself within that ten. Even if I do end up deceiving her in the process.

In a bid to escape from those omniscient eyes of Cardinal, I turned away, loosened my shirt collar, and dangled the dagger there after putting my head through the chain. After making Eugeo do the same, I asked something that caught my attention a little during Cardinal's earlier explanation.

"Now that I think about it... if something's needed as compensation to create an object, then what about those? That heap of food and drinks you brought forth when we came here."

Cardinal lightly shrugged her shoulders up and down, and replied with a smile.

"Now, there's no need to fret over that. I merely made two or three trifling books on law disappear."

Still gripping onto the chain on his neck with both hands, a weird 'mgh' noise came from the depths of Eugeo's throat, being the history lover that he was.

"Nn? What is it, you want more? You're a growing child, I see."

Eugeo shook both his head and hands at the same time to stop Cardinal, about to raise and swing her staff.

"N-No, I'm full already! Ra-Rather than that, please continue the story!!"

"There's really no need to restrain yourself."

When Cardinal said so, smiling so much that it made me think that she was fully aware all along, she lowered the staff, coughed once, and changed her tone.

"—The sequence changed, but those two daggers are our true trump cards as I have explained earlier. Eugeo's would be for Alice and Kirito's for Administrator; prioritize stabbing your dagger into your respective targets over all else. Resort to anything if you believe it will raise the possibility of success, be it surprise attacks or playing dead. After all, my belief is that the one and only thing you two excel above the integrity knights in, is how you are more accustomed to being devious... no, to the tactics of actual battles."

Before a somewhat upset-looking Eugeo could get a word in, I chimed in with a "I totally agree".

"I wish we could just struggle all the way to the end with sheer trickery, but... unfortunately, the other side has the home advantage. We'll have to be prepared for a frontal assault. That brings me to my point, Cardinal. I take it that what you said earlier, that 'provide equipment equivalent to those of the integrity knights' bit, essentially meant that you'll be pulling out heaps of weapons or armor of the sacred instrument class?"

This might be a tense situation, but the soul carved into me as a member of the clearing group was acutely receptive to the smell of a «strongest weapon obtaining event». As I anticipated Cardinal's words, my hearting beating fast, the sage made an exasperated face for the umpteemth time today and voiced out a blunt remark for the umpteemth time today.

"Imbecile, what has been entering those ears of yours? Look here, the creation of a high ranking object requires..."

"—I see... the compensation of an object with equivalent class was needed... wasn't it..."

"Don't give me that face, like a child whose snack fell to the ground! You're making me start doubting my decision of choosing you both. In the first place, you ought to be well aware that a weapon is not something that can be freely controlled the instant you are granted it. No matter how powerful a weapon I give you, you can't hope to prevail against those of the integrity knights, whose beloved pieces of equipment they have treated as their own flesh and blood, and passionately used for decades."

I recalled Eldrie's whip that could freely slither through the air, practically like a silver snake, and couldn't help but nod. It was true, even in my SAO days, that it was taboo to immediately toss a rare weapon into actual combat just because you had found one.

When I became depressed, feeling not like a kid who had dropped a snack but one who had knocked over an entire christmas cake, Cardinal continued ahead with a blend between disgust and pity on her face.

"In the first place, you and Eugeo already have swords the two of you have cared for and are powerful enough without me needing to produce one, don't you?"

"Eeh!"

Eugeo reacted this time by springing up.

"Will you recover them for us!? My Blue Rose Sword and... Kirito's black one!?"

"There's no helping it. Those two swords are irrefutably true sacred instruments. The first, a weapon of which only four exist in the world, solely for the dragon knights' use; the second, containing the essence of a demonic tree that continued to absorb resources from a vast area over several hundred years... immediately creating weapons on the same class as those would prove a difficult task for even Administrator and me. Furthermore, the both of you have already gotten used to those two blades enough."

"Oh come on... if you could do that, then say so earlier."

I breathed a sigh of relief, leaning back onto a bookshelf at my side. I had half-abandoned the wish of regaining those cherished swords seized from us before we were thrown into the underground jail, but I absolutely couldn't complain if we were to regain them.

"But... even if you talk about recovering them, it would be impossible to teleport them straight here, wouldn't it?"

"Indeed, it seems you finally understand."

Agreeing with my words, Cardinal crossed her arms with a complex expression.

"I dare say those swords are stored in the equipment vault on the third floor of the cathedral. It is a mere thirty mel... thirty meters or so away from the nearest backdoor, but as you've seen earlier, doors connecting into the tower cannot be opened a second time. The bugs released by Administrator to search for me would immediately swarm there, you see... Hence, I have no choice but to have the two of you exit from that door and recover those from the equipment vault, then ascend the tower on each of your own two legs. Fortunately, there is a large staircase in front of the equipment vault."

"Hmm... starting from the third floor, huh... By the way, which floor is Administrator's room on?"

"Central Cathedral grows taller year after year, you see... it should be close to a hundred floors at the present moment..."

"Hyaa..."

I unintentionally choked off my throat. The gigantic white stone tower built at the heart of Centoria certainly was so high that its peak couldn't be seen regardless of which part of the city you were—but I didn't think it actually had more stories than the real world's skyscrapers. We wouldn't be brought into a battle on each and every floor, would we; I unconsciously voiced out a complaint while feeling somewhat dejected.

"Ermm, can't we start on the fiftieth floor or something instead...?"

"It depends on your point of view, Kirito."

The one who interjected with a bitter smile was Eugeo, ten times more optimistic than me.

"The enemies coming at us would probably be split up accordingly with the length of the distance."

"Ah, uh, well, that might be true, but..."

Shifting my back hesitantly, I sat down in the passage before dryly clearing my throat.

"...Well, I did go up the open-air stairs at the old Tokyo Tower..."

"Hah?"

"No, it's nothing. —I guess our operational plans are decided for now, then. First, we'll recover our swords from the equipment vault. And with them, we defeat the integrity knights that appear as we climb the tower. If we encounter Alice during that, we make her fall asleep with the dagger and send her to the Great Library Room. If we reach the hundredth floor, we stab Administrator with the dagger as well and get our hands on Alice's memory fragment."

I finally prepared for the worst and Cardinal's calm words rained down on me.

"Regrettably, there is one more thing we will need to do."

"Eh... wh-what?"

"Your swords are certainly powerful, but you will not defeat the integrity knights through them alone. That is because they possess a dreadful technique to amplify the ability of their weapons by several times."

"Ah... could that be the «armament full control art»...?"

Cardinal curtly nodded at Eugeo's hoarse voice.

"Weapons of the sacred instrument class strongly inherit properties from the object that served as its nucleus. Eldrie's «Frost Scale Whip» the two of you fought against was the lord of the largest lake in the eastern empire, a two-headed white snake, which Administrator captured alive and converted into a weapon. However, it retained parameters, the agility of a snake, the sharpness of its scales, and the accuracy of its aim, even after it became a mute whip. The full control art releases all of those so-called «memories of the weapon», realizing a more potent offensive power than was originally impossible."

"Uhn, so that means his whip becoming a snake wasn't an illusory art or anything like that, huh..."

I groaned as I stroked where I had gotten hit by Eldrie's whip on my chest with my fingertips. While praying that white snake thing didn't have a delayed poison, I lent my ears to Cardinal's explanation that continued still.

"Every single one of the integrity knights have mastered the full control art for the weapon granted to them by Administrator. That includes training in high speed chanting to ensure that they do not get caught during the long art ritual. I suppose there really would be no time for chanting practice, but

gaining victory would be most uncertain if the two of you don't learn the full control art for your respective swords at the very least."

"No... but my black sword was just a huge tree, not an animal, you know...? Would it even have any memories to release?"

"It would. Those daggers I passed over earlier are the same, they are capable of opening a channel towards me the moment an attack hits, through a process identical to the full control art, only because they retain the memory, or property in other words, of being my hair. It goes without saying that the previous existence of your sword, the Gigas Cedar, qualifies and the origin of Eugeo's Blue Rose Sword, from an eternal block of ice, is no exception."

"It... it was ice and nothing more?"

Eugeo, too, opened his mouth in a daze at this. That was only natural, even if I had to list the properties of ice, I can't think up of much more than «very cold». I cocked my head in confusion, but still, as it was the word of one of the two gods in the world, I could only accept it.

"Well... if you're teaching us the art ritual, it'll probably work as the full control art for our swords too. I'll be real grateful for getting a special move, what kind is it?"

But the reply was beyond my expectations once again.

"Don't behave like a spoiled brat! I will describe the art ritual, but you will be the one to decide what sort of technique it becomes yourself!"

"Eh... eeh!? Why!?"

"It is insufficient to simply chant the art ritual to «release the memories», the essence of the armament full control art. The owner must strongly picture the released form of that beloved weapon... you must recall. Rather than the perfect control art itself, the process of recollection could be said to be a more influential power. After all, the power of imaging... that is, «incarnation», is the founding principle behind the world..."

Even I couldn't understand over half of the words Cardinal rapidly spoke. Especially the word, 'incarnation', which I couldn't decide was from the Sacred Tongue or Common Tongue and tried to ask for its meaning but felt a prickling sensation from a corner of my memories before I could.

That was... yes, a little more than two months ago. When I sank into depression while holding on to those torn and scattered zephyria flower buds at the flower beds in the novice trainee dormitory's at the Sword Mastery Academy, someone... no, it wasn't just someone. Cardinal's familiar, Charlotte the small black spider, called out to me. 'Each and every art ritual is nothing more than an incarnation, that is, a tool to guide and arrange your mental images', she said.

I visualized an image based on her words. For the life energy released from the blooming four great sacred flowers in the surrounding flowerbeds to flow into the severed seedlings left in the planters. Despite not chanting a single word of any art ritual, a green light filled the air and engulfed the seedlings... and with that, the zephyrias revived.

Yes, that must truly be the «process of recollection» Cardinal spoke of. I would agree if that was the case, I doubt it would be possible to express the entirety of such a phenomenon within an art ritual.

Perhaps having read my inner thoughts, Cardinal nodded once with a serious expression, then turned her eyes to Eugeo, still perplexed, and spoke.

"Follow me. Rest for a bit, and we will put the art ritual together later."

After leaving the history book corridor and descending several levels, we returned to the circular room on the first floor of the Great Library Room that I was first brought to.

The many manjuu and sandwiches still remained on the plate on the center table with steam rising from them despite it being over two hours since then. It appeared that not only was an art used on them to recover the Lives of the ones who ate it, but also one to forever prevent them from becoming cold.

It was only natural for my appetite to reignite upon seeing that, but I found it hard to reach out for them now that I knew the food had previously been books from the bookshelves. Staring up at Eugeo and I, standing still with conflicting thoughts within ourselves, Cardinal coldly spoke.

"They would pose a hindrance to recollection, so I'll have them disappear if you aren't eating."

"Wa-Wait, please put them somewhere we can't see for now. We'll keep them for later when we go off."

The sage lightly shook her head and brought the staff in her right hand up at my stubborn words. A single knock on the table's edge and the large plate sank into the tabletop along with the variety of manjuu.

In their place, three chairs with backs rose from the floor and Cardinal waved her hand, signaling for us to sit. Sitting down as requested to, I stared at the now-clean-and-tidy table with nothing on it.

It wasn't like I was trying to summon back the manjuu with that; I was trying to visualize the form of that beloved sword currently not in my possession—temporarily named the «black one». However, I was unable to replicate it perfectly, down to its finer details, partially due to the fact that I had hardly had many chances to actually become acquainted with it.

Trying the same thing as myself and apparently feeling the same distress, Eugeo spoke with a troubled expression as he sat by my side.

"...Cardinal-san, is it really possible? Visualizing the sword's released form without actually having it around is simply..."

However, Cardinal gave an unexpected answer as she sat on the opposite side.

"It's actually easier without it around. If it was actually laid before your eyes, your mental image would freeze there. You need neither your hands nor eyeballs to feel, approach, and release the swords' hidden memories. It'll suffice, seeing it in your mind's eye."

"Mind's... eye, huh..."

Muttering, I recalled when the zephyria seedlings revived once more. If my recollections proved right, I had neither touched nor stared at the four great sacred flowers that shared their lives with the zephyrias on the verge of death back then. I just believed and gave my thoughts an image. For the life force to overflow, gather, and stream in.

It seemed Eugeo reached his own understanding too, as he was giving several small nods. The black robed sage gazed at us, faintly smiled, then solemnly announced.

"Excellent. Now, firmly visualize your beloved sword lying atop the table first. Don't stop until I give the cue."

"...Got it."

"I will do what I can."

Eugeo and I answered softly, then straightened ourselves atop the chairs and lowered our sight to the tabletop.

I gave up in roughly five seconds earlier but now, continued to stare at it this time determinedly. There was no need to hurry. I'll start by clearing my mind.

«Black one». Now that I think about it, it was rather pitiful, being called by such a half-baked nickname, no, temporary name even now.

It was on the seventh day of the third month when its base material, a branch cut off from the top of the huge tree, Gigas Cedar, had been polished into the shape of a sword through a whole year with the handiwork of the craftsman in the capital, Sadore. Today was the twenty-fourth day of the fifth month, so it hadn't accompanied me for even three months. Excluding maintenance and practice, I had only drawn it from its scabbard once against the head swordsman-in-training of the previous year, Uolo Levanteinn, in a match and once against the head swordsman-in-training this year, Raios Antinous, in—a real battle. That was all.

However, during both of those times, the black sword had helped me out by exhibiting a power that could have only been the will of the sword. Despite the fact that I was the one who had chopped down its previous form, the Gigas Cedar. Our acquaintance might truly be shallow, but the sense of unity and resolve whenever I gripped its handle and unleashed a sword skill were definitely not inferior in any way to the swords I had cherished in the past.

Despite that, the reason why I hesitated to name the black sword was because I felt its contrast with the weapon Eugeo held, the «Blue Rose Sword», might have perhaps been far too intense when lined up side-by-side...

White and black. Flower and tree. Two swords with both similar and opposite parts.

There was no basis to it, but I have always been bound by a single premonition ever since I had set off on the journey from Rulid Village two

years earlier. That the Blue Rose Sword and the black sword might possibly be fated to exchange blows someday.

My mind tells that shouldn't happen. Because the owners of the swords, Eugeo and I, don't have a single reason to fight among ourselves. But on the other hand, my heart tells me that doesn't apply to the swords themselves. After all, the Blue Rose Sword personally sliced the Gigas Cedar's trunk, toppling it to the ground...

I continued to visualize the black sword's form on the tabletop even as reminiscence and anxiety, rather than emptiness, filled my mind. A simple pommel in the form of a truncated cone. A grip wrapped in black leather. A guard in the shape of a forceful curve. It was hard to believe the hefty blade tinged with a deep translucency, like a black crystal, had originated from a tree. Light shone onto it accumulated within, making the edge and point that were as sharp as a razor, gleam beautifully...

Each part of the illusional sword had their shapes trembling fuzzily at first, but stabilized accordingly as my other thoughts faded away. Soon, it possessed toughness, weight, even warmth, and began releasing a dense aura atop the table.

With my eyes dedicated solely to the glossy blade, I heard a voice from somewhere.

"Deeper. Dive deeper. Until you touch the memories hidden within the sword, the essence of its existence."

The blackness of the sword stretched out without a sound. Masking the table and floor, the surrounding bookshelves and lamps, it engulfed the world in darkness. Before I knew it, only the sword and I remained in this lightless, infinite space. The black sword silently rose, turning its pommel downwards and its point upwards, and ceased motion. My form flickered and dissolved, my consciousness sucked into the sword.

When I regained awareness, I was transformed into a single cedar tree, rooted in the chilly earth.

A thick forest surrounds me. But for some reason, there isn't a single tree growing around me. I stand still forlornly in the exact middle of this wide, empty circle. I try calling out to the moss and ferns covering the soil at my feet, but there is no reply.

.....Solitude.

Desolation, the feeling of loneliness, fills me. Wanting to caress the branches of other trees with my own, I eagerly move them each time the wind blows, but unfortunately, they do not reach.

They may reach if I stretch them further. With that thought, I absorb the earth's energy from my roots and the sun's energy from my leaves with all I have. Instantly, my trunk expands in thickness and my branches grow in length. My leaves, like pointed needles, approach the glossy, light-green leaves of the konara oak growing closest.

However, aah, what misfortune. The leaves of the konara oak wither light-brown immediately before I touch them, all falling to the ground in a whirl. Even its branches and trunk lose their moisture and rot, drained, and it collapses from its roots before long. It isn't just the konara. The other trees that were standing around the empty land wither and perish one after another, crumbling away. The moss immediately masks their remains.

I grieve for a while in the middle of the empty land that has expanded again, then absorb energy from the ground and sun once more. My trunk creaks as it swells out, my branches creak as they stretch out in all directions. I turn to the top of a nearby machilus next, desperately reaching out with my leaves.

But yet again, the other party's leaves wither and its trunk rots, having lost its life, and falls before I make contact. Along with the tree beside it. And the one beside that. The trees crumble away one after another and the empty land expands again.

The neighboring trees ended up withering due to me absorbing energy from the earth and the sun in my bid to extend my branches. Even while understanding that, I do not give up making contact with the other trees. How many times had this repeated? Before I knew it, I became several tens of times bigger than the trees of the forest and the cleared land had expanded to several tens of times its original area. And the same goes for the depth of my solitude.

No matter how far my branches stretch out, the day my pointed leaves touch the other trees' leaves will never come. I could not turn back any longer by the time I had realized that. My leaves and branches, protruding high above the forest, continue to monopolize a huge amount of sunlight regardless of my will and my roots, laid out across the ground, continue to absorb a massive amount of energy from the earth. The cold, vacant land expands day by day and the trees continue to fall, one after another...

"Good, that's enough."

All of a sudden, I heard that voice and was released from the cedar tree.

With just a single blink, the surrounding scenery returned to the Great Library Room where I was previously. Endless bookshelves illuminated by lamps of orange light. Polished stone flooring. A round table—and atop it, two swords. They were my «black one» and Eugeo's «Blue Rose Sword». They seemed exactly like the real ones, but that was impossible. Both of our beloved swords should have been confiscated from us when we were taken to the cathedral.

When I gazed at the white and black swords in a daze, a small hand reached out from the opposite side of the table and first held the black sword by its grip. The sword abruptly quivered in that instant and vanished without a sound.

Next, the hand touched the Blue Rose Sword by the side. That one disappeared in an instant as well, as though it was sucked into that palm.

".....Yes. I have certainly received the «memories of the weapon» both of you guided."

Raising my head at the voice that seemed satisfied, my eyes met those of the black robed girl sitting on the opposite side—the sage, Cardinal. Then, I finally realized that I seemed to have fallen into some kind of trance. When I looked to the side, Eugeo's green eyes were aimlessly wandering about again, but his body suddenly trembled and he blinked several times.

"...Huh... I was on the summit of the highest mountain of the mountain range at the edge..."

I instinctively called out to my partner, still murmuring some vague words, with a wry smile.

"So you went somewhere like that?"

"Yeah. It was an extremely cold and really lonely place..."

"Come now, it is not the time to relax yet."

Scolded while on the verge of entering chit-chat mode, I straightened up my posture in a fluster. When I secretly took a peek at the other side of the table, the young sage's eyelids were closed beyond those lenses. Her

eyebrows were slightly lowered, indicating that she was thinking about something, but eventually, she lightly nodded and spoke.

"Fm... Rather than coming up with a technique, it seems better to prioritize with the simplicity of the art ritual. Now, Kirito, let's first start with your sword."

She lightly knocked on the table with the fingertips on her left hand and a sheet of parchment silently appeared on the surface. She touched the blank parchment with her right palm this time, gently brushing against it from top to bottom.

With just that, an art ritual that extended over ten lines distinctively surfaced upon it. Spinning the parchment around, she slid it in front of me. Repeating those actions once again, she moved the second sheet in front of Eugeo.

My partner and I exchanged glances, then simultaneously fixed our eyes upon the parchment before us.

The characters, written down in blue-black ink and a neat script, were entirely in the Sacred Tongue, which would mean letters, without a single character from the Common Tongue, which would mean Japanese. It followed the orthodox format for sacred art rituals, with the line number on the left and the text on the right. I skimmed through the text, that started with [system call] on the first line and ended with [enhance armament] on the tenth, as I counted the number of words and it really did go over twenty-five words.

True, it was essentially shorter than the full control art for the «Frost Scale Whip» Integrity Knight Eldrie used, but memorizing all of this was considerably difficult.

"Er-ermm... is taking this with me..."

"It goes without saying you can't. You should know that even those chicks in the academy, the trainees, aren't allowed to look at their textbooks during actual practice."

After rejecting me with an exasperated face, Cardinal continued.

"Firstly, if you take an object related to this library room out and it falls into the enemy's hands, there is the possibility of cracking through the space isolation."

"Th-Then those daggers we got earlier..."

"Those are linked to my own self, so it will not pose a problem. Come now, stop complaining and get to memorizing it. Eugeo has already gotten started."

I looked to the side in shock and as expected of him, Eugeo was exhibiting his honor student power, staring hard at the parchment as though he was consuming it and moving his lips in small motions. After I turned my eyes back to my own text, resigned, Cardinal mercilessly added more instructions.

"The time limit is thirty minutes, be sure to memorize it before then."

"N-No way, it's not like this is an academy examination... how about just a little more..."

That lightning struck yet again the moment I started to criticize, on the verge of giving up.

"Imbecile! Look here, the two of you were thrown into the underground jail and got your swords confiscated yesterday at about eleven in the morning. And ownership rights get reset if twenty-four hours pass from then, so you'll end up losing your opportunity to use this full control art."

"Ah... th-that's right. By the way, what time is it right now...?"

"Seven o'clock had already passed by long ago. There would be nearly no time left if we assume the time you will take to recover your sword would be two hours."

"......Un-Understood."

This time, I steeled my resolve and started scrutinizing the lines of the commands seriously.

Luckily, the sacred arts of the Underworld were written in the familiar language of English unlike the magic of Alfheim Online. The syntax was close to that of programming languages as well, so it was possible for me to remember it while understanding its meaning.

The art ritual written down by Cardinal ①declares a reference to the embedded data within the object (i.e. the memory of the weapon) saved within the main memory; ②selects only the required parts and modifies them; ③assigns them to the sword, as it currently is, to amplify its

offensive ability; it seems to be composed from those three processes. As a technique, it was close to the «image buffer overwriting experiment» I carried out on the zephyria flowers during my novice trainee days, but the art ritual was full of vocabulary not in the academy textbooks, so it would probably be impossible to write it down without knowing all of the commands like Cardinal.

I kept a part of my head thinking about a related topic even as I engraved the ten line art ritual into my mind.

The Rath researchers who created the Underworld called the data system that documented all of the objects in this world «mnemonic visual». It was already an event from over two years ago for me, but I roughly explained its structure to Asuna and Sinon at Agil's store in Okachimachi, Taitoku-ku. My understanding had grown though observation and experiments since I had gotten thrown into this world.

The many existences in the Underworld were not polygon models like currently existing VRMMOs. The memories of stones and trees, dogs and cats, tools and buildings, and such were read in, equalized, and stored into the main storage, the «Main Visualizer», from the consciousness of the people who connect to—no, live in the world. And when the need arises, those memories are drawn out and passed on to the ones who dived in. After all, making the zephyrias bloom in the north empire, where they weren't supposed to, was through temporarily overwriting the equalized buffer data of «unable to bloom» to an image of «can be made to bloom».

Each and every object in this world is saved as memories.

If that was the case, it would be possible to do the opposite and modify a memory into an object as well, wouldn't it? That would make that scene I once saw, incomprehensible, otherwise.

Two years and two months ago, after gaining consciousness in the forest south of Rulid, I arrived at the bank of the Ruhr river that flowed through the forest. There, I had caught sight of a scene that felt far too vivid. The back view of a boy with flaxen hair, a girl with long, blonde hair, and a boy with short, black hair walking in the setting sun.

That image vanished in mere seconds, but that was definitely not an illusion. I can still vividly replay it, even now, when I close my eyes: the sunset dyed red, the swaying light on the girl's hair, the sound of footsteps upon the short grass. Back then, I must have summoned those three

children from my own memories. The flaxen-haired boy was definitely Eugeo. The blonde-haired girl was Alice. And the black-haired boy was—...

"It has been thirty minutes. How is it going?"

I interrupted the thought unfolding at a corner of my consciousness at Cardinal's voice.

Turning the parchment on the tabletop over, I tried to call to mind the art ritual from its very beginning. I smoothly recalled all the way to the final word despite not concentrating very hard and answered, relieved.

"It's probably flawless."

"That's a pretty self-contradictory answer. What about you, Eugeo?"

"Er... erm, it's probably flaw.... fine."

"Very well."

After nodding with a face like she was suppressing a cynical smile, Cardinal added on.

"I'll say this first, but you must not use the full control art recklessly, regardless of how powerful it may be. The swords will lose quite a bit of their Lives with even a single use. Naturally, losing because you were too stingy to use it is an even bigger no-no. Use it when you judge that the time truly requires it. Be sure to properly place it back into its scabbard to allow it to recover its Life afterward."

"That... that sounds difficult..."

I murmured with a sigh, then flipped the parchment on the tabletop back face-up. I scanned through the art ritual again to double-check and noticed something.

"...Huh? This art ritual ends with the sentence, «enhance armament», right?"

"What about it, you have something to say?"

"N-No, that's not what I'm getting at. If I'm not wrong, the full control art Integrity Knight Eldrie used when we fought him had another art ritual following it... Erm, re, re-re..."

Eugeo sent a lifeboat out from the side as I hemmed and hawed.

"Release recollection... was that it? When he chanted that, the whip became a real snake. That was really surprising, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, that's it. Cardinal, our full control arts don't need that?"

"Fm..."

The sage dressed in black answered my doubts even while making a face that seemed like she was going to say something bothersome again.

"Look here, the armament full control art has two stages. Those are «strengthening» and «releasing». Strengthening refers to partially awakening the weapon's memories and manifesting a new offensive ability. And releasing refers to... as the term suggests, it awakens all of the weapon's memories, releasing its rampaging power."

"Rampaging power, huh... I see. So Eldrie's «Frost Scale Whip» can extend its range and split when strengthened, and when released it transforms into a snake, attacking enemies automatically, huh..."

Confirming my words with a single blink, Cardinal bluntly spoke.

"That is indeed the case. However, I'll say this first, the two of you are still far from being able to use the release art."

"Why... why is that?"

The sage turned to Eugeo, blinking his eyes in surprise, then continued in a stern tone.

"I said it was a rampaging power, did I not? The offensive ability brought about by releasing its memories are certainly not within the realm of control for a swordsman who has just recently learnt the art ritual. All the more so if it is a sacred instrument of a high priority... it would drag not just the enemies but yourself in as well, and if you use it shoddily, it may even cost you your life."

"Un-Understood."

Eugeo ended up obediently nodding, demonstrating his honor student aptitude from our academy times, so I couldn't help but to incline my own head up and down. It appeared Cardinal sensed my discontentment, however, as she added on with a sigh.

"A time when the two of you are able to use the release art will eventually come... perhaps, or maybe it won't. The swords will teach you everything. Well, only if you succeed in taking them back, that is."

"Heeh..."

Cardinal appeared annoyed at my reply and sharply stabbed the staff in her right hand onto the floor.

The two sheets of parchment in front of Eugeo and I rolled up from their ends and shrank tight—by the time that thought came to me, they had already turned into long and narrow baked pastries.

"You must be hungry after using your head, eat."

"Eh...? We won't forget the art ritual we memorized if we eat it or something like that...?"

"How could something so palatable possibly happen?"

"O-Oh, okay."

After exchanging looks with Eugeo, we picked up the baked pastries. I figured it was one of those simple pastries I bought and ate at Centoria's central marketplace, baked from wheat flour with sugar sprinkled on, but it was baked from pie dough and coated with white chocolate, a pastry that truly felt real-world-ish. When I took a bite out of it, its crispy texture and rich sweetness flooded my mouth, my tears almost flowing from the excessive nostalgia.

Eugeo and I finished it in a trance, as though we were competing with each other, and took a deep breath before lifting our heads and meeting Cardinal's eyes which were watching over us with a gentle gaze.

The young sage slowly nodded and spoke.

"Now... it's about time for us to say our farewells."

There was a heavy weight within those short words; I instantly shook my head.

"When we achieve our goals, you'll be able to get out of here, right? Calling it a farewell is just exaggerating..."

"Fm, I suppose that's true. If everything goes as planned, that is..."

"....."

True, if we were defeated by the integrity knights in the midst of battle on the way to the top floor of the cathedral, Cardinal would once again be subjected to a test of her patience in this Great Library Room. The load experimental phase would probably arrive before she found another collaborator and the Human World would sink into seas of blood and flames.

But for one who implied such a tragic end, Cardinal's smile was soothingly clear and a sensation that gripped my chest tight assailed me. The sage gave me, firmly chewing on my lips, a nearly imperceptible nod and softly turned away.

"Come, there is no time. Follow me... I will dispatch you from the door closest to the equipment vault on the third floor of the cathedral."

The passage from the central hall of the Great Library Room's first floor to the entrance room, connected to countless backdoors, was sorely far too short.

I did nothing but stare at Cardinal's small back as she walked right in front of me, with Eugeo mouthing the art ritual for the full control art at my side.

I wanted to talk to her more. And I wanted to know more about what she felt and thought in that period of time that exceeded two hundred years. I couldn't but desire to do so; that emotion filled even my throat, however Cardinal's pace was resolute, not forgiving even the slightest hesitation, and I could do nothing other than walk in silence.

Having guided us to the familiar, large room with many passages lined up on its three walls, Cardinal proceeded towards a single passage, stretching out from the right wall, in the same manner. She walked for another ten meters or so and right before reaching a single simple door at the end, built into the wall, she finally stood still and turned around towards us.

The smile on those lips, colored like cherry blossoms, was as gentle as it always was. Her mouth, that seemed to even display a sort of satisfaction, moved and a clear voice streamed out.

"Eugeo... and you, Kirito. The fate of the world is entrusted to the two of you as of now. Whether it gets covered in hell fire... or sinks into absolute nothingness, or perhaps..."

Looking straight into my eyes, she voiced out the continuation.

"—You discover a third path. I have already imparted all I can, given all I could. You simply have to head down the path you believe in."

"...Thank you very much, Cardinal-san. We will definitely reach the top of the cathedral... and return Alice to what she was."

Eugeo unequivocally spoke in a voice infused with determination.

I figured I ought to say something as well, but couldn't find the words. Instead, I took a single deep bow.

After a nod, Cardinal wiped her smile off and held onto the doorknob with her left hand extended.

"Now then... go!"

The doorknob turned and the door was thrown wide open in the next instant. Resisting the dry, cold wind that immediately blew in vigorously, Eugeo and I leapt out at once.

After walking for five, six steps like that, another small noise came from behind. When I looked over my shoulder, there was only a glossy marble wall coldly obstructing the way; the door connected to the Great Library Room had vanished without leaving behind the slightest trace.

Chapter 8 - Central Cathedral (5th Month of Human World Calendar 380)

Part 1

What a great distance I have traveled—

A lofty ceiling, uniform marble pillars, and the floor, an exquisite stone mosaic that used a variety of rock types.

Even as he had his breath taken away upon beholding the splendor of the Axiom Church Central Cathedral's interior for the first time, Eugeo couldn't help but to think so.

Until slightly more than two years ago, he believed that his life was to continue hacking away in vain at an unfellable tree with his axe. To pass his days immersed in memories of his blonde childhood friend, lost long ago, without getting married or having children, before turning his sacred task over to the next woodcutter after years had passed, living deep within the forest like that, and having his Life expire someday without anyone noticing.

However, the black-haired youth who had suddenly appeared one day forcibly broke through the small world that confined Eugeo. He even managed to hack down that absolute barrier sealing the path towards the capital, the Gigas Cedar, with a method that generations of woodcutter could never have imagined, causing Eugeo to approach a crucial juncture. To continue living in the small village while holding onto his memories of Alice. Or to set out on a journey to recover Alice—

It would be a lie to say that he hadn't faltered. Eugeo's first thought was of his family the moment Gasupht, the village chief, said that he could choose his next sacred task on that village festival night.

Until then, Eugeo had always turned over all of the wages he had earned from chopping the Gigas Cedar to his family. Their occupation for generations had been growing wheat, but their fields were confined, especially in recent years where revenue was scarce due to the succession of poor harvests. His parents and elder brothers might not mention it outright, but they were likely partially counting on the stable income Eugeo earned each month.

The earnings as a woodcutter would naturally be gone with the felling of the Gigas Cedar. However, he could probably receive preferential treatment in gaining an area well-exposed to the sun in the newly cleared, cultivated land in the south if he chose to grow wheat like his father and the rest of his family as his sacred task. Upon spotting the faces of his family from the stage, mixed with anticipation and anxiety, at a corner of the cheerful villagers making merry, Eugeo was at a loss.

He was, but only for a brief moment. Eugeo forcibly tipped the scale balancing a reunion with the girl from his childhood and a life with his family, and he made a declaration. That he would leave the village and become a swordsman.

Even if he were to choose being a swordsman as his sacred task, he could still receive a salary from the village if he had stayed in Rulid and become one of the guards. However, leaving the village was, ultimately, to stand on his own two feet, away from his family's side. The money Eugeo brought to his family and the new fields they could have received were all nullified. The reason he had left in such a hurry, on the day after the festival, was because he could not bear to see his parents and elder brothers' faces, suppressing their disappointment and dissatisfaction.

There were chances where he could have chosen to start a new life with his family even after setting off with Kirito. Having participated in the swordsmanship tournament held in the town of Zakkaria, Eugeo won in the end, alongside Kirito, which had earned him the right to enter the guard corps, and he did so. Enduring the harsh training for half a year, they received letters of recommendation to take the examination for the North Centoria Imperial Sword Mastery Academy from their commanding officer in the guard corps, but an invitation from the commanding officer came with that. Their ranks would rise next year if they remained with the guard corps, with the level of skill the two had, and even becoming the commanding officer in the future was no fantasy. How comfortable would his family's lifestyle have gotten if he had gained a stable income in Zakkaria and sent a portion of it back to their home by entrusting it to an itinerant wagon?

However, Eugeo politely declined the commanding officer's invitation and got him to write the letter of recommendation as planned.

While en-route to the capital, his goal, and after enrolling in the Sword Mastery Academy as well, Eugeo continued making excuses in a corner of his mind the entire time. For example, if he was chosen as the academy's

representative swordsman, gaining victory in the Four Empire Unity Tournament, and thus, inducted as an honorable integrity knight, he could enable his parents and family to live in unimaginable extravagance. Or if he made a triumphal return to the village, clad in silver armor and straddling a flying dragon alongside Alice, his parents would have more pride in him than anyone else.

However, by drawing his sword against the elite swordsmen-in-training, Raios Antinous and Humbert Zizek, two evenings past, Eugeo had betrayed his family for the third time. At the very least, he had discarded the considerably likely future of being invested as a first class aristocrat if the circumstances had allowed it... no, that was an understatement; he had discarded even his status as a commoner and chosen instead the path of being a major criminal who had violated a taboo.

Back then, Eugeo was conscious of those circumstances somewhere in his mind, even when he was induced into motion by a tremendous rage. If he were to cut Raios and Humbert at this very moment, he would lose anything and everything. Eugeo drew his sword while aware even of that. He did it to help Tiezé and Ronye who appeared to be getting raped before his eyes; he did it to continue in the justice he believed in; but that wasn't all to it. He had desired to release that bloodthirst rampaging within his heart; he had desired to erase Raios and Humbert without leaving a single trace behind; he had certainly desired to take action on those murky thoughts.

Really now, what a great distance I have traveled—

He had made a complete turn from one of the exclusive twelve elite swordsmen-in-training in the academy, to stepping upon the floor of the most sacred place in the world as a rebel, an enemy of the Axiom Church.

Fleeing from the pursuit of the bow-using integrity knight, Eugeo was informed of the existence of a book that recorded down all history of the Human World from a young girl who was supposed to be the previous highest minister of the Axiom Church in the mysterious Great Library Room he had entered, and proceeded to read it as though he was devouring it. Because he needed to know, no matter what. Whether there were any humans who had pointed a blade towards the church, fought with integrity knights, and escaped far away somewhere after accomplishing their wishes, in the long history.

Unfortunately, he couldn't find a single episode of such a person. The influence of the church spread far and wide, covering the world, and all of the masses would prostrate themselves before the authority of the integrity knights; no matter how serious the quarrel was—it would be easily overcome, even if it was a dispute over imperial borders between fellow empires. There wasn't even a single record of anyone who had drawn a sword in an attack against the church and fought against the integrity knights in the massive history book, no matter how hard he had examined it.

...In other words, I am the worst sinner over the three hundred and eighty years since the Human World was created by the goddess of creation, Stacia.

The moment Eugeo thought so while closing the back cover of the book, an icy chill assailed him. If Kirito hadn't come back with such perfect timing and called out to him, he would have probably have continued to quail as he cowered there.

Eugeo had to convince himself countless times, even as he listened to a tale from the mysterious previous highest minister with his partner. He could no longer return to his previous way of life after choosing to abandon his family, slash another man, and fight against the church. He had no path aside from moving forward, no matter how much blood may stain his hands, no matter how many sins may besmirch his soul. For the sake of that one purpose that he had left.

To recover the «heart fragment» stolen by the current highest minister, turn Integrity Knight Alice Synthesis Thirty back into Alice Schuberg, and send her to the dearly-missed Rulid Village.

However, his wish to live together with the girl could no longer be granted. The one and only place he thought he could go now, with the many crimes he had committed, was beyond the mountain range at the edge, into the dreadful land of darkness. But that was fine too. There was nothing more to hope for, if Alice could live happily where she was born.

As Eugeo reflected upon his mute determination, he stared at Kirito's back, moving ahead of him.

...If I said I will go to the land of darkness, would he come with me...?

Upon asking that question silently, Eugeo forced himself to stop imagining his partner's reply. Thinking about how his path forward might, in the near

future, part from his black-haired staunch friend, the only other person in this world standing in the same position right now, was unbelievably terrifying.

As Cardinal mentioned, the corridor that extended straight from the door was unexpectedly short.

He walked quickly, while sunk in thought for a mere instant; it didn't take him long before reaching the spacious, rectangular room.

The central portion of the right wall had staircases, surprisingly wide and respectively rising up and descending down. The ceiling's height extended over eight mel, thus, it seemed there were over twenty steps until reaching the landing at the halfway point of the staircase.

And set in the left wall were grand double doors, surrounded by sculptures of winged beasts.

Kirito walking in front quickly turned his right palm this way and hugged against the wall, so Eugeo followed suit and pressed his back against a stone pillar within reach. Holding his breath, he scanned through the gloomy, spacious room.

If the previous highest minister's words prove right, the grand doors on the left ought to be the equipment vault they were looking for. Despite being such an important place, the spacious room was silent as the grave, lacking the presence of any others. Even the light from Solus that shone in from the large staircase to the right appeared stained in an icy gray hue.

"...There's no one around, huh..."

Upon softly whispering towards Kirito's back, his partner nodded, slightly disappointedly as well.

"It's an equipment store, so I figured there would be a guard or two, but... I guess maybe it's because the Axiom Church wouldn't have anyone entering to steal in the first place..."

"But they know about our intrusion already, right? They're rather calm despite that."

"They really do have reason to be. They have no need to spend their time searching around for people like us. In other words, the next time we meet integrity knights, there will either be a considerably large number of them

or considerably strong ones. C'mon, let's make use of this time extension as much as we can."

Ending his words with a hmph, in a snort, Kirito agilely ran out from the cover of the wall. Eugeo followed after that, crossing the deserted, spacious hall.

The doors to the equipment vault had embossed carvings of the two goddesses, Solus and Terarria, and no keyholes, but they possessed such intensity that it made him think that unbelievers might not be able to open them, no matter how hard they pulled or pushed. However, after Kirito put his ear against the door for a bit, then placed his hands upon the handles, putting some force into them, the doors opened so easily that it was practically a let-down. The hinges didn't even let out a single creak.

A dense, cold air, like several hundred years worth of stillness, swirled out from the black gap of around fifty cen that opened up and made Eugeo shiver, but his partner slipped himself through without hesitation, so he hurriedly followed behind. When the solemn doors closed behind, their surroundings were engulfed in complete darkness.

"System call..."

The art ritual that instinctively left his mouth overlapped perfectly with Kirito's voice, so he ended up smiling despite the situation. While continuing with generate luminous element, Eugeo recalled the time he went with Kirito to the north cave to search for Selka. It was hard enough using the basics of the basics among the sacred arts back then and he couldn't do much more than making a stick held in his hand light up faintly at its tip—

The pure white luminous element brought forth atop his right palm pushed aside the dense darkness, incidentally brushing away Eugeo's nostalgic mood.

"Uo..."

As Kirito let out an astonished voice at his side, a gulp simultaneously came from Eugeo's throat.

What space. It was labeled a vault, so he imagined a place like the Sword Mastery Academy's tool storehouse, but this was ridiculous. It had practically as much area as the large practice arena where Kirito and Uolo Levanteinn had held their match.

Radiance of each and every hue filled the space, reflected illumination from the luminous element that shot from Eugeo's palm, with the surrounding smooth stone walls on all four sides.

Systematically lined along the floor were suits of armor, placed upon supports modelled after humans. In addition to having pitch-black ones, pure-white ones, and those in dazzling hues of coppery reds, silvery blues, and golden yellows, they also included each and every sort of armor, from light armor constructed from thin chains and leather to heavy armor, large metal plates joined together without any gaps. They numbered no less than five hundred.

And on the tall walls hung, yet again, practically every kind of weapon in existence, closely packed together.

Even among the swords alone, there were long ones, short ones, with a wide range of thick, thin, straight, and curved ones also. In addition, there was a great variety of combat equipment, from single-edged and double-edged axes, to lances and long spears, warhammers, whips, and maces, to bows stretched from the floor to nearly the ceiling, their numbers practically uncountable, and Eugeo could do naught but leave his mouth agape.

"...Sortiliena-senpai might get overwhelmed and faint if she came here, huh."

Kirito finally broke the silence with a whisper several seconds later.

"Yeah... The same goes for Gorgolosso-senpai, he'd throw himself at that large sword and never let go of it if he saw it."

Sighing as he murmured a reply, Eugeo then forcefully expelled the breath choked in his throat. Scanning through the vast equipment vault once more, he shook his head two or three times.

"How do I say this... is the church thinking about eventually starting its own army or something? The integrity knights alone should already be enough, though..."

"Hmm... to fight with the army of darkness...? No, that's not it..."

Kirito's expression suddenly stiffened and continued with a glance at Eugeo.

"It's the reverse. It's not to make an army... but to make it impossible to create one; that's why the church has been gathering equipment here. The equipment here is probably all powerful, at sacred instrument class or somewhere around there. The highest minister, Administrator, didn't need some organization aside from the Axiom Church from getting their hands on strong equipment and obtaining excess battle potential..."

"Eh...? What's that supposed to mean? There can't possibly be an organization that'll turn on the Axiom Church, no matter what kind of strong equipment they hold, can there?"

"In other words, the one with the least faith in the church's authority might just be the venerable highest minister herself."

Eugeo could not immediately grasp the meaning of Kirito's sarcastic words. However, his partner patted him on his back before he could ponder on them.

"Come on, time's running out. Let's hurry up and get our swords back."

"Ah... y-yeah. But it'll be a daunting task to look for them from all these..."

The Blue Rose Sword and the black sword were sheathed in their respective sheaths of discreet white and black leather, but many similar swords could be spotted on the walls.

"...Even if we try to use the umbra element searching art again, the sacred power in the area should have been used up by the luminous elements earlier..."

It was in that moment, when Eugeo let out a sigh while thinking 'if that was the case, we should have just used a single light', that Kirito unhesitatingly spoke.

"Oh, found them."

Lifting his right hand, he pointed to the immediate left of the doors they had entered.

"Woah... to think they're in a place like this."

The white and black swords at the spot Kirito pointed towards were certainly the pair's beloved swords, beyond any room for doubt. Eugeo gazed at his partner's profile in mute amazement.

"Kirito, how did you do that without even using any sacred arts...?"

"I just figured that the newest swords brought in might be placed closest to the door."

Despite how Kirito, who revealing his reasoning, would normally childishly show a proud smile at such times, he was now for some reason staring solemnly at his own black sword. But he then immediately exhaled, approached the wall, and gripped the black leather sheath after reaching for it with his right hand.

He froze for a fleeting instant, as if hesitating, but lifted it off the metal supports before long. Following that, he took the Blue Rose Sword at its side with his left hand and tossed it. Eugeo caught it in a panic and the familiar weight made itself known to his wrist.

Despite spending less than a few days away from his beloved sword, a powerful sense of nostalgia and relief that surprised even Eugeo himself flooded through him and he tightly grasped the sheath with both hands.

The Blue Rose Sword was always close to him and had helped him out countless times ever since the Gigas Cedar was felled back home. It was there when he had entered the swordsmanship tournament in the town of Zakkaria; it was there when he had challenged the entrance examinations for the Sword Mastery Academy; it was even there when he had disobeyed the Taboo Index and amputated Humbert's arm.

If the Axiom Church had always been gathering all kinds of powerful equipment over the many years, them overlooking this Blue Rose Sword, laying dormant in the north cave, was truly good fortune—or perhaps fate. Evidence that following the path of taking Alice back was definitely not a mistake...

"Stop getting all overwhelmed already, hurry up and wear it."

Abruptly regaining his senses at Kirito's voice, mingled with laughter, he saw that his partner had already attached his beloved sword's sheath onto the clasp of his sword belt. Eugeo followed suit while showing an embarrassed smile, ending with a pat on its pommel and looked around as he pondered on their next step. The elite-looking armor lined up on the ground had engraved nameplates hung on them, with names such as [Senrai Armor] or [Shinzan Kacchu][4], inciting quite an interest from him.

"...What should we do, Kirito? We'll probably be able to find one that suits us with this many around, do you want to borrow some armor too?"

"Naah, we haven't worn armor before, right? It's best not to do what you're not used to. Let's just take those clothes over there."

Looking towards the place his partner pointed and true enough, he saw clothes in a variety of colors arranged at a section within the ranks of the armor. Looking down at his own body, he found spots torn and frayed on the academy uniform he had worn from two days ago due to the fight and subsequent retreat from Knight Eldrie.

"True, they'll likely become indistinguishable from rags sooner or later at the rate we're going."

The two luminous elements drifting overhead were gradually losing their radiance too. Casting away his lingering regrets over the armor, he ran over to the clothes section and haphazardly dug through the fabric that seemed to be of high quality, looking for a coat and trousers that matched his frame. Turning their backs to each other, they quickly changed.

Putting his hand through the sleeve of ultramarine clothes extremely similar to his academy uniform, Eugeo was shocked by the texture's smoothness. When he turned back after changing, he saw Kirito had the same thought, stroking the black fabric with both hands.

"...These clothes definitely have their own little bit of stories to tell. It would be nice if they could stop the integrity knights' attacks somewhat, though."

"Now that's hoping for too much."

After laughing a little at his frivolous partner's words, Eugeo's expression tautened.

"Now then... shall we get going?"

"Yeah... I guess so."

Trading short remarks, they returned to the entrance.

Things had gone so smoothly thus far that it could be considered disappointing, but it would hardly remain that way. Let's proceed with our guards up—their deep, mutual nods silently included the recognition of that fact; Eugeo grasped the right handle of the doors and Kirito, the left.

Gently pulling them open together, the gap gingerly widened—

Do-ka-ka-ka! That noise came almost concurrently from the countless steel arrows that pierced through the surface of the thick doors.

"Uwah!"

"Owah!?"

The doors were hurled open with the weight of the impact; Eugeo and Kirito fell onto the ground, their rear-ends first.

A familiar knight in red armor stood on the grand staircase's landing, far away on the opposite side of the rectangular room stretching out from the opening, starting to nock fresh arrows onto a long bow of nearly the same height. Furthermore, that was with four at the same time. There was no mistake that this was the same integrity knight riding the flying dragon in the rose garden.

The distance between us is roughly thirty mel, huh? Swords definitely can't reach, but it's likely the perfect range for an expert archer. And we probably won't have the time to draw the swords at our waists from this unsightly fallen posture, let alone getting up and taking cover at the walls.

That was why I said we should wear the armor! It would have been even better if we had a shield!

Eugeo screamed thusly in his heart as the knight began drawing the longbow's string almost simultaneously.

With things as they are, I have no choice but to give up on evading without getting hurt and use all I have to avoid a fatal wound—no, a severe wound that'll render me immobile at the very least.

Eugeo opened his eyes wide and stared at the four nocked arrows. The dull silver-colored arrows were aimed not at their hearts, but their legs. It was as Cardinal mentioned, the order passed down to the knights was likely not to take them out, but to capture them. But in the current circumstances, getting captured was essentially the same as getting murdered.

The integrity knight drew the strained bowstring to its limit.

A moment of stillness arrived, where all motion seemed to cease—

Kirito's tense voice pierced through that opening.

"Burst element!"

Eugeo could not instantly catch what his partner said as it was too fast. He understood its significance only after the phenomenon occurred.

A brilliant whiteness suddenly radiated across his vision.

An intense light, as if Solus had descended. It was a simple art that merely set free a luminous element, one of the «elements» that served as the foundation of elemental sacred arts, but Kirito hadn't recited the art ritual for generating elements. Just where did—...

No, there was an element. There were luminous elements, drifting in midair, called out by both of them to illuminate the equipment vault tens of minutes ago, weren't there? The neglected elements were on standby for any sequential art rituals. Kirito gave the order for the element floating over his head to be set free and produced that immense light.

—There was him throwing that glass fragment he had picked up during the fight with Eldrie too; I'm totally no match for him at fighting by making use of items lying around as always...

While thinking about such things, Eugeo gathered strength into his legs within the pure white light and jumped to the right with all his might.

He immediately heard the screeching noise of steel arrows digging into the stone floor, coming from where he had been until half a second ago. It would be best to take cover by the walls first, having averted a direct hit—or so he thought, when Kirito's low shout reached his ears.

"Forward!"

Understanding his partner's aim in an instant, Eugeo kicked off the ground once again. Not slanting off towards the right, but straight forward.

The luminous element's explosion was from overhead, behind the pair, which meant Kirito and Eugeo did not face the light source directly, but the integrity knight's eyes should have taken the light head-on. There was no doubt his eyesight would remain robbed for several more seconds.

The luminous element's direct offensive ability was low when compared to thermal and cryogenic elements, and mostly used in healing arts instead, but if one were to make a weapon emanate light strongly, it possessed the promising abilities of blinding eyes and inspiring awe. Hence, it was wise to prepare an element of the opposing type, the umbra element, for the sake

of neutralizing art rituals when the opponent generates a luminous element during battle; this was taught even in the academy's lessons.

There was no way an integrity knight, standing at the apex of all swordsmen and art users, would not have heard of such common knowledge, which meant calling a new luminous element out and blinding him would not work for a second time. This was the first and last opportunity to narrow the distance from the enemy archer.

Speedy analysis of the situation and selection of actions were also an essential point of the Aincrad-style, or so Kirito told Eugeo countless times. It was a way of thinking utterly different from the High Norkia-style that emphasizes refinement and gallantry in movements. And the charm to calm one's mind down for putting that point into practice, even in the midst of battle, was «stay cool».

A step behind his partner following the usage of the luminous element, Eugeo frantically chased after the footsteps in front. He drew the Blue Rose Sword from the left of his waist as he ran.

Having served its purpose, the luminous element vanished immediately after, and the world regained its color and form. The pair had already run into the spacious hall from the equipment vault. Affirming with both eyes wide open, that the integrity knight could be seen standing around twenty steps up the staircase ahead.

As predicted, it appeared that the knight's vision was still impaired. His body tottered with his right hand on the face guard of that bronze-colored helmet.

It was a true stroke of luck that unlike Eldrie, the integrity knight in front of them did not wear a sword on his waist. He had an astonishing amount of self confidence, bringing nothing more than a single longbow when picking a fight indoors. He must have been convinced that he could shoot through the pair's legs before they could approach.

Eugeo's mind was calm, but still, he could not suppress that tiny flame of anger, languidly swaying in a corner of his consciousness.

—Integrity knight, you're the same as Raios and Humbert. You are haughty, arrogant, and you believe yourself to always be in the right. You are convinced that you, justice incarnate, have absolutely no chance of losing.

—But that is your own vanity. Just wait, I will... prove that to you this instant!!

Pushed on by a rather foreign emotion, Eugeo charged onto the grand staircase. It was after traversing the first two steps, just as his right foot reached for the third.

The knight, standing on the landing slightly more than ten steps ahead, removed his right hand from the face guard, turned it around towards his back, and drew out steel arrows from a quiver. Every remaining one, all at the same time.

The packed bunch of arrows that his right hand nimbly brought back numbered at least thirty no matter how one looked at it. Without even granting enough time to question what he had in plan, the knight nocked the entire bunch of arrows onto the string of the longbow held horizontal with his left hand.

"Wha..."

Stopping with his foot on the third step of the grand staircase, Eugeo gulped. There ought to be no way that single slender bowstring would be able to fire thirty arrows together at once.

A metallic, creaking noise reached his ears. Something cold ran down his spine upon noticing that it was the steel arrows screaming as they endured a tremendous grip.

It appeared Kirito, who had stopped on the right, had deduced the knight's intentions as well. It could be a bluff made in desperation, or—

An increasingly violent squealing swept out; the longbow was drawn back heavily.

"—Jump back to the left!"

Kirito shrieked.

Binn! The air reverberated, followed immediately with a snapping sound as the bowstring broke under the pressure.

But every single one of the thirty steel arrows were fired out into a radial pattern, cascading down onto the pair as a lethal, silver storm.

Eugeo kicked off the stairs with such force that he thought his right foot broken, pitching his body towards the left. He laid the Blue Rose Sword across the center of his body, protecting it.

The pair surely would have been riddled with holes if the knight had not had an issue with his eyesight.

One arrow struck the Blue Rose Sword and was repelled with a shrill noise. One weaved through the right cuff of Eugeo's trousers, one made a shallow cut at his left flank, and one grazed his left cheek, shearing off several strands of hair.

Loudly crashing onto the ground, shoulder first, fear made Eugeo grit his teeth as he looked down along his own body. After confirming the lack of severe wounds, he turned his face towards Kirito who had jumped towards the right.

"Kirito! You alright?!"

His black-haired partner lightly nodded with an expression that went rigid as expected upon his hoarse shout.

"So... somehow. Looks like it went through the gap in between my toes."

He saw an arrow stuck in through the tip of Kirito's left shoe, piercing through the sole, when he took a look. While giving thanks to his partner's reaction speed and good luck, Eugeo took a deep breath of air.

"...That was dangerous..."

He murmured as he urged his numbed body to stand.

When he looked up at the landing, the integrity knight had truly ceased motion this time round. The quiver on his back was empty and the longbow's string, too, was broken and dangling loosely. This was truly what running out of options meant, with his bow broken and arrows spent[5]. But the opponent was an integrity knight, so it would be unacceptable to let down one's guard, not to mention this was no situation for pity.

"...Let's go."

His partner gave a subdued call and Eugeo set his right foot onto the stairs once again.

But Kirito instructed Eugeo, with his left hand still gripping onto the arrow extracted from his shoe.

"Wait... that knight's reciting an..."

"Eh."

Eugeo pricked up his ears in a fluster. So long as they weren't at a distance where they could slash the enemy with a single bound, it was imperative to generate the opposing element when he starts to recite a sacred art. He focused on the voice, warped in a metallic manner, uttered from under the integrity knight's helmet. He chanted rather fast, but he caught it somehow, perhaps because he was made to study in that library room.

However, each and every phrase in that ritual was new to his ears. He couldn't adopt a countermeasure without the phrase that included «generate», that determined the type of element.

"Crap, that's..."

In that moment, Kirito's voice came out in a gasp.

"This isn't an elemental attack. It's the «armament full control art»."

Before those strained words could end, the integrity knight shouted the final phrase lucidly.

"—Enhance armament!"

With a 'po' sound, orange flames were born at the bowstring's two torn and dangling ends. The flames consumed the bowstring in the blink of an eye and then something occurred the moment they reached the two tips of the longbow.

A deep crimson blaze swirled up from the entire copper bow.

A fervor that seemed enough to scorch one's skin extended to the bottom of the stairs and Eugeo instinctively shielded his face. The integrity knight standing at the landing draped the flames surging out from the bow around his whole body, looking as though he was set ablaze.

Eugeo was at a loss on what action to take, with the utterly unforeseen development. Should he conclude that the knight had no offensive ability even after using the full control art, since those arrows were already spent,

and rush in? Or perhaps the knight spent all the arrows on the attack just a moment ago because they were no longer necessary in the full control state?

Wondering which his partner saw it as, he took a fleeting glance at the side and saw Kirito staring in wonder, with even a faint smile upon his lips just like a child, neither drawing back nor charging in.

"Now this is amazing... I wonder what the origin of that bow is."

"This isn't any time to admire it."

He felt like knocking against Kirito's shoulder out of habit, but he held it back and looked up at the knight once more. They could use the full control art they had recently learned as well, to deal with the opponent's art ritual, but there was no doubt the other side would not permit that. It was certain they would be attacked before they could finish reciting the lengthy art ritual. If they were inclined to use it, they couldn't possible complete it in time unless they had started chanting with the opponent.

With things this far developed, there was naught but to adapt to the opponent's moves; Eugeo resolved himself for the worst, but it appeared the integrity knight intended for a respite for the time being as well, raising his helmet's visor with his right hand while the blazing bow remained in his left.

His face wasn't visible, sunk deep within the shadows cast by the flames, but Eugeo discerned an intense gleam in his eyes that actually reminded him of steel arrows. The voice that followed, too, carried a mechanical reverberation that made it seem unlike a human's.

"—It has truly been two years since I basked in the flames of the «Conflagrant Flame Bow» in this manner. I see, it does appear that you possess enough ability to exchange blows with Knight Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-one, criminals. However, that makes it more unforgivable. To not engage in a fair and proper battle between knights, but to deceive Thirty-one through those repulsive darkness arts!"

"Dar... darkness arts, you say?"

Kirito spoke from the side, as though he was taken aback. Eugeo lost his breath for a moment too, then vehemently shook his head as he shouted.

"Th... that's not it, we haven't used darkness arts or anything like that! We were merely talking about Eldrie-san before he became an integrity knight and..."

"What, before he became an integrity knight!? We integrity knights do not have a past of our own! We have always been glorious integrity knights from the moment we were summoned from the Celestial World!!"

The steel-like, enraged words made the grand staircase tremble and snatched Eugeo's breath away.

According to the girl, Cardinal, all of the integrity knights have had their memories sealed away before becoming one. In other words, this red knight before his eyes, too, simply believed thoroughly that «he was summoned from the Celestial World».

It seemed possible to stir integrity knights into unrest if their original memories, blocked by that object called a «piety module», were stimulated, but that was impossible when he weren't even aware of the opponent's name. In short, he couldn't be immobilized with the same method used in Eldrie's case.

The knight let out a thunderous voice with heightened severity in the midst of the endless sparks scattered by the longbow.

"I will not reduce the two to you to cinders as I was ordered to capture you alive, but prepare yourself to have an arm burnt away with the Conflagrant Flame Bow now released as you can see! Try all you wish, to see if those shoddy swords are capable of slipping through these flames of conviction and reaching me!!"

The knight placed his right hand approximately where the bow, raised high, would originally have held its string. Before even allowing the time to ponder what the gesture his fingertip adopted, like gripping onto something, meant—

Intense flames surged out in front of the bow and transformed into a single arrow in an instant. Eugeo's back went rigid upon vividly sensing an absurd amount of power contained within that flame arrow brilliantly gleaming.

"Guess neither breaking the bowstring nor running out of arrows mattered."

Kirito voiced with a dull groan at his side, so he gathered strength into his jaw that seemed like it was about to tremble and quickly answered.

"Any plans?"

"He can't shoot multiple times in a row, that's my hunch. I'll stop his first attack somehow, so you go in for the kill."

"Hunch, hey..."

—In other words, that meant everything was over if that flame arrow could be shot consecutively. However, even if it was a single shot, that was evidence enough to prove that it possessed enough might to kill in one attack. wasn't it? Doubts over how Kirito would defend against an attack like that burgeoned, but Eugeo shrugged them off and nodded.

"—Got it."

Kirito would probably stop it if he said he could. This was far more realistic when compared to the absurdity of him chopping down the Gigas Cedar when he said he would.

Perhaps interpreting the pair, returning to a stance with their respective sword at the ready, as resolving themselves for the worst, the integrity knight started to draw the invisible string with an air of composure.

The heat caressing Eugeo's cheeks strengthened further. The flames emitted from the longbow, apparently named Conflagrant Flame Bow, had already reached the landing's ceiling and were scorching the marble black.

Kirito moved without warning.

With neither a war cry, nor a strong kick off the ground, he charged forth like a leaf from a tree swept away by rapid currents. A split second late, Eugeo followed behind in agitation.

Only a faint, blue light shone through his partner's loosely gripped fist as he ran up the steps, but Eugeo still noticed. He had probably generated them in secret while the knight delivered his speech, and he had no doubt that was the radiance emitted by cryogenic elements.

The knight finally drew the longbow to its limit when they approached the halfway point of the twenty-steps staircase.

An art ritual rapidly gushed out from Kirito's mouth at the same time.

"Form element, shield shape! Discharge!"

The number of elements that lined up and shot forward from his left fist, sharply thrust out, was the maximum simultaneous limit for a single hand, five. The blue points of light successively transformed into large, round shields, starting with the foremost, and creating a thick obstruction between Kirito and the integrity knight.

A ferocious voice roared out from the knight's mouth for the third time when he saw that.

"Don't make me laugh!—Pierce through them!!"

The accumulated conflagration, that flame arrow—no, it would be more accurate to call it a spear by now, fired with a jolt, its howl bringing to mind a fire dragon's breath.

The flame spear came into contact with the ice shield Kirito had created after an instant of flight.

The first shield dispersed in a transient moment, its fragments immediately turning into vapor as well.

The second and third, too, were penetrated before the noise of shattering reached his ears.

The fourth shield had its core, where the arrow struck, deeply bent inwards, but as expected, it wasn't enough and dispersed. Looking through the final shield remaining, the flame spear that drew close to his eyes and nose colored his vision bright red.

But still, Eugeo did not slacken his pace and continued dashing up the stairs. He couldn't leave his partner, right before his eyes, charging forward savagely alone.

Eugeo gritted his teeth and caught sight of the flame spear that collided with the fifth shield in front, finally losing some of its impetus, regardless of how little that reduction was. Sparks were violently thrown into the air when it was unable to break through the barrier originating from its counter elemental attribute.

"——!?"

Eugeo's eyes flashed wide open in that moment. It appeared like the blazing spear beyond the semi-transparent ice wall changed its form for an instant. The form, with a beak wide open and wings spread out, was practically the same as a bird of prey...

But without giving Eugeo even the chance to blink, countless cracks surfaced on the final shield and it smashed into pieces.

A heatwave that denied him from even breathing then descended. The flame spear, no, flaming bird that had penetrated through every barrier made a savage assault as though to consume Kirito within its flames as well.

"Uooooh!!"

That was when a spirited yell finally surged out from Kirito's mouth. He sharply thrust the black sword held in his right hand forward.

He's not going to try slashing that giant bird, is he, Eugeo wondered. However.

The sword Kirito extended straight forward traced an inconceivable arc. It spun like a windmill, moving lightning-fast with those five shining fingers acting as the fulcrum.

But that speed was extraordinary. It was unknown how exactly those fingers moved, the blade rotated with more momentum than the eyes could follow, as if a semi-transparent black shield had made its appearance there.

The flaming bird's head made contact with the sixth shield.

Dowaa!! That thunderous noise might have been the giant bird's enraged howl—

The lethal blaze that had smashed through five ice walls was shredded into over a thousand scraps by the rotating blade, scattering it away in a radial manner. But a few among those enveloped Kirito's body, causing small explosions one after another.

Watching his partner's body whisked into the air as though it was repelled, Eugeo screamed.

"Kirito—!!"

Even while he was swallowed by the endless sparks, Kirito shouted back from the air.

"Don't stop, Eugeo!!"

Shaking off his momentary indecision, Eugeo glared forward. Kirito would never stop and let a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity escape in this situation. He had accomplished what he said he would. So he would surely have to fulfil his side of the deal.

Passing his partner, as he fell down on the right, Eugeo leapt up the remaining steps.

Cutting through the remains of the blaze that drifted in the air in a single surge, the landing where the knight stood in the way was practically right before him.

It must have been beyond the integrity knight's expectations as well, for that attack, that took all of his might from the armament full control art, to be repelled without inflicting any injury. His actual face still couldn't be seen from this distance, but he sensed a hint of surprise from within the helmet. There was no longer enough time to draw the bow and fire another shot. As long as he wasn't armed with a sword, by allowing him to close the distance—

-It's your loss!

Eugeo brandished the Blue Rose Sword aloft while projecting that silent cry.

"Don't underestimate me, rascal!!"

The knight bellowed as if he heard Eugeo's thoughts.

The shade of surprise vanished in an instant and an overwhelming fighting spirit enveloped the copper-hued heavy armor. The left arm that held the burning longbow was raised high, overhead, and the terrible flames gathered in his fist once more.

"Doaah!!"

Alongside a scream that rippled the burnt air, the knight's left fist thrust out in a straight line.

—What now!?

He had already launched into a lunge, but that thought flashed through the depths of his mind for an instant.

Normally thinking about it, both the range and power would be higher on this side, when comparing the sword and the fist. But the other side was standing in a favorable position. Would the comparatively slender Blue Rose Sword be able to push back the fist thrown from the integrity knight who was not only tall, but had the advantage of being three steps above as well? Should he avoid here and attack again after climbing up to the landing?

No—

Kirito, a knight of the Aincrad-style who was Eugeo's teacher while being his close friend, had once mentioned this.

—In this world, what's important is to put something into your sword.

—You have to be the one to find what to put into your sword.

It was the same for the one who mentored Eugeo, Gorgolosso-senpai, the one who mentored Kirito, Sortiliena-senpai, and even the haughty yet dishonorable nobles, Raios and Humbert; they possessed something that endowed their swords with power. But Eugeo personally felt he was still searching for one. His daily training piled up more than anyone else and he understood various secret moves, but he had yet to find something to imbue into his own sword. It might even be something he might never find for all of eternity, as one not born as a swordsman.

Still. At the very least, he could not succumb to this integrity knight's vigor and draw his sword back this particular time. After all, the time for him to devote single-mindedly to sword practice was over. Eugeo had an unwavering objective now. To regain Alice, turned into an integrity knight with her memories stolen.

——Alice.

Yes, that was all that mattered. He could do nothing but watch as his childhood friend was taken away by a knight on that summer day eight years ago; this time, he would save her for sure. His proficiency in swordsmanship, his knowledge in sacred arts, polishing all of that was for that purpose.

—Please, lend me your strength. I am still inexperienced and might not be cut out to be the master of a renowned sword like yourself... But I can't help but to go forward now!

While calling out within his heart, Eugeo firmly bent his entire body after taking a stance with the Blue Rose Sword held overhead.

A vivid blue light enveloped the faintly translucent blade. Aincrad-style secret move, «Vertical».

"O... oohh!"

Guided by a keen intent, the sword lunged forth. A tempestuous thrum, unique to secret moves, reverberated from the blade as it flashed through the air and clashed against the integrity knight's conflagrant left fist.

The shock wave of the blue and red lights coalescing into one and dispersing outwards in a circle, tore up the red carpet laid over the stairs

and the fabric hanging on the walls. The fist and sword remained unmoving in midair, still joined together.

Creak, creak; the armored gauntlet and sword blade grated against each other. Eugeo exerted all of his might in an attempt to complete the secret move, but the knight's arm didn't make the slightest movement, as though it were a rock. However, the opponent didn't seem to have much surplus composure either. A low groan escaped from inside the helmet as he shifted his entire body weight into his fist.

It was a stalemate, but one that lasted for utter seconds. The flames released from the Conflagrant Flame Bow still held in the knight's fist started licking at the Blue Rose Sword as well. The light of the secret move that covered the blade flickered as though it could not endure the heat. If «Vertical» was interrupted here, it was certain that the sword would be swept away in an instant and he would suffer from the scorching-hot attack head-on.

"Gu... uh, oo....!"

Eugeo mustered all of his physical and mental strength in a bid to swing the sword down. However, the flames continued to intensify and the blade began to turn red-hot.

He hadn't paid attention to it until now, but the Blue Rose Sword possessed an elemental attribute of ice according to the «sword's memories» he saw in the Great Library Room. As such, it would be weak against searing flames, its opposing element, and keeping this situation up for too long was quite capable of exhausting its Life to a dangerous degree.

But at the same time, it ought to be possible to negate the enemy's flames with the sword's element.

—You were tempered by the coldest blizzard in the mountain range at the edge since the creation of this world.

—Don't you dare lose to a sheer flame like this!

Perhaps responding to Eugeo's cry—

An abrupt chill came forth, stinging not only his right hand, holding the grip, but the left hand that supported the pommel as well. It surely was no hallucination. As proof, the miniature roses carved upon its guard were

being covered in a pure white frost. The frost turned into thin tendrils, rapidly creeping up the blade, and dispersing the licking flames.

The phenomenon did not end there. The pure white ice tendrils stretched out onto even the knight's adjacent fist, showering frost to dispel the flames wrapped around the copper-colored armor...

"Nuhh..."

Perhaps due to the impossible chilly sensation, a groan escaped from the knight. Not missing the instant his opponent's posture faltered, regardless of how minor it was, Eugeo released the power he had stored up.

Gyaan! A ear-splitting noise swelled out, the sword swung down and repulsed the knight's left fist.

However, the sword tip did not touch the enemy's body, unfortunately. The knight aimed at Eugeo, fruitlessly slashing the sword straight down, and sent out his right fist without a moment's delay. It wasn't blazing, but suffering the rock-like impact of that strong fist would propel Eugeo away to the bottom of the staircase without any difficulty.

But.

"I... eeaaah!"

Alongside that tempestuous yell, Eugeo's sword swung up from a sharp angle.

Slashing back with the Blue Rose Sword, heavier than a lump of steel of equivalent size, through physical strength alone, was impossible regardless of how strong one was. There was only one reason why it was made possible: it was a secret move from a swordsmanship style. Aincrad-style two-hits skill, «Vertical Arc».

The blade that swiftly carved out a trail that resembled the sacred letter, 'V', sliced through the integrity knight's breastplate diagonally. A few deep crimson drops spattered from the gash sliced into the copper-colored armor. The sword tip caught the knight's flesh—but it was only shallow.

As the knight freed his upper body, he braced his legs and leapt backwards. He would be granted the room to fire those flaming attacks once again if the distance were widened here. However, there was a brief, compulsory period of rigidness after the usage of any secret move.

Kirito had told him to constantly think about how to eliminate that gigantic pause caused from using a secret move. Of course, it wasn't a problem if the slash hit, but there was the danger of suffering from a fatal counterattack in the case where it was warded off, dodged, or failed to stop the opponent's movements like this time.

The rigidness caused by secret moves was unpreventable and nothing could be done about it even if one was expecting it. He could come up with methods to eliminate that delay, like switching with an ally or releasing a pre-generated wind element to create distance through wind pressure. But Kirito was blown away to the hall and there wasn't enough time to recite an art ritual either. That brought the remaining methods to one.

Eugeo mustered all of his physical and mental strength to control the movement of the Blue Rose Sword while it was on the trajectory of Vertical Arc's second stroke. He held the blade, that originally should have slashed up leftwards, as though it was supported by his left shoulder. The blue light covering the blade suddenly vanished due to the excessive strength injected, but that didn't matter as the attack itself had already ended.

The Blue Rose Sword halted atop his shoulder just as the knight harshly kicked off the ground. The landing of the grand staircase was wide, and he probably had the plan of firing yet another blazing spear while Eugeo was petrified if he succeeded in retreating to the wall's edge. There would be no way for Eugeo to defend if he permitted that.

The final method to break through the enforced rigidness.

That was to link a new secret move to a secret move. By performing the activation stance of the next skill atop the ending stance of the previous skill, the period of rigidness could be erased. It was the secret move among secret moves that even his teacher, Kirito, could accomplish only half of the time, «connecting skills»—

"......!!"

Letting out a sharp breath of air, Eugeo hoped for the skill's activation with all his heart. Immediately after, the sword vividly shone once again. His body leapt forth as if he flicked there. The blade slashing down from the upper-left growled as it drew close to the integrity knight. One-hit secret move, «Slant».

At last, the knight's two eyes opened wide within that helmet.

Neither the pain that assailed his right eye, nor those spinning bright-red sacred letters made an appearance as they had when he tried to slash Raios and Humbert. There wasn't even any indecision or hesitation. The single notion of cutting an enemy deserving of it set Eugeo's entire body into motion.

The Blue Rose Sword fiercely swung down straight at the knight's right shoulder. Following the metallic noise from the spaulder splitting apart, the dull and heavy impact transmitted itself to Eugeo's right hand. The resistance he felt from the tightly grasped sword was unmistakably from slicing human muscle and crushing human bones.

Inflicted with a deep gash reaching from his shoulder through to his chest, the integrity knight was thrown onto his back, onto the ground.

"Goahh!"

The confined voice whispered out from beneath the helmet and immediately after, a massive amount of blood spurted out from the helmet's base, visibly redder than than the copper color of the armor.

This made it the second time he had cut a human, but Eugeo still felt his breath stop for a moment. A sort of squeezing sensation beset the pit of his stomach upon noticing the feedback that remained on his right hand, but he desperately forced it down.

As though in agreement with Eugeo's feelings, the Blue Rose Sword emitted yet another intense wave of cold air, turning all of the blood that clung to the blade to frost and after shaking that off, it returned to its usual state. The knight's right shoulder was frozen pure white when he looked, the dripping blood formed into a small icicle.

"Guh..."

The integrity knight let out a low groan as he raised his left hand that still held onto the bow, trying to move it towards the wound. Eugeo gathered power back into his right hand that held onto his sword upon seeing that. He would have to slash the fallen knight once more if the opponent began to recite sacred arts. As a high ranking user would be able to use all of the sacred energy in the surrounding air to restore Life, he would have to inflict a severe injury on his mouth, slice his arm off, or perhaps, there was no method to render him powerless aside from taking his life.

However, it seemed the knight gave up on healing upon noticing his left fist was utterly frozen and unable to let go of the bow that had already lost its flames. Subtle movements with the fingertips were necessary for elemental art rituals. Letting out a long sigh with what appeared to be a crooked smile, his arm fell onto the ground with a crack.

Eugeo was at a loss on what to do now. The chill produced by the Blue Rose Sword had driven away the enemy's flames, but it brought forth the effect of stopping his blood flow as well, by freezing the wounds. The knight wouldn't be able to fight any longer, but neither would he die. The frozen left hand would defrost eventually if left alone, and he might give chase after fully recovering through sacred arts.

The one who spoke first was the integrity knight, as Eugeo stood still while chewing on his teeth.

"...Youngsters..."

Eugeo straightened his posture at that voice, hoarse yet maintaining its dignity, but the narrative that followed was a little unexpected.

"What is the name of that secret move you first used...?"

"....."

He was puzzled for just a little, but Eugeo moved his dry lips and answered.

"...It's from the Aincrad style of swordsmanship, a two-hits skill, «Vertical Arc»."

"Two... hits skill."

Repeating his words, the knight stayed silent for a moment, but soon resumed his questions.

"You there... what was the skill you used...?"

The knight's helmet made a slight motion, so Eugeo shifted his view towards the back for a sheer instant. When he did so, he saw Kirito, burnt in various spots, slowly climbing the stairs while pressing down on his left arm and dragging his right leg along.

"Kirito... how are your injuries!?"

When he answered in a panic, his partner gave a weak laugh.

"It's fine, I prevented most of the severe burns. ...Mister Knight, what I used was the Aincrad-style defensive skill, «Spinning Shield»."

"....."

Upon hearing that, the knight peered up at the ceiling as his helmet creaked, then sunk back into silence.

The voice that flowed out several seconds later was hushed, as if he was addressing himself, rather than Eugeo and Kirito.

"...I have always planned to search through the Human World from end to end... and whatever lies beyond that... but it appears swords and skills unknown to me do still exist within this world... —Your skills are suffused with the might from the accumulation of earnest training. It was my mistake... to accuse both of you of leading Knight Eldrie into depravity through deplorable arts..."

The integrity knight moved his head once more, shifting his vision towards Eugeo from within the face guard.

"...Won't you... tell me your names?"

After exchanging a glance with Kirito, Eugeo curtly stated his name.

"...Swordsman Eugeo. No family name."

"I'm Swordsman Kirito."

After nodding as though he was deliberating over their names, the integrity knight let words emerge that were even more unexpected.

"...Several integrity knights are awaiting the both of you on the fiftieth floor of the cathedral, in the «Grand Cloister of Spiritual Light». Not to capture you alive, but to eliminate the Life of you both and to take your mortal lives... The next breath you take will likely be your last, the instant you choose to sortie with a frontal charge as you did earlier."

"Hey... hey, mister, you sure it's okay for you to say something like that?"

Kirito interjected in slight bewilderment. But the knight faintly revealed what resembled a smile again and muttered.

"As have I failed to accomplish Administrator-sama's command... My emblems of being a knight, this armor and sacred instrument, shall be confiscated and I will be penalized by being frozen for an indefinite period

of time... —Please cleave my Life before I suffer such disgrace... with your own hands."

"....."

The knight added on, looking to the speechless Eugeo and Kirito.

"There is no need for hesitation... after all... your magnificent sword skills have already brought forth defeat..."

They heard his name next—one enough of a shock to stop Eugeo from breathing.

"Mine... Of this integrity knight, Deusolbert Synthesis Seven."

This wasn't to the degree of only mildly recalling it from somewhere.

That name was one deeply engraved upon Eugeo's soul, not fading away for even an instant, over these eight tangible years. It encompassed a profound regret and despair, along with anger accompanying them.

"Deusol... bert? That time... you were...?"

Eugeo heard the voice choked out from his own throat, a hoarse one that seemed to belong to someone else.

The color of his armor was different and all the voices of the integrity knights took on a similar metallic echo with their helmet on, so he hadn't actually noticed up until now, but still, in that case, the knight who lay collapsed before his eyes right now was the one who had once stood before Eugeo's eyes and—

Some sort of impact pushed Eugeo from behind and he took several unsteady steps forward.

"Eugeo...?"

Kirito's questioning voice barely made it to his ears. His upper body stooped over, he peered at the face within the helmet close up.

Perhaps some sort of art ritual had been applied to the helmet, as the knight's face was actually shrouded in darkness even after the gap was shortened to several tens of cen. However, he could clearly perceive those two eyes that retained their strength even after that huge quantity of Life was sheared off. They seemed both young and weathered, with sharp corners.

Moving his parched lips, Eugeo whispered in a grating tone.

"You said to cleave... your Life...? It was a magnificent duel, you said...?"

His right hand convulsed uncontrollably while the Blue Rose Sword still in his hand began to radiate an intense chill once again. A white frost immediately wrapped around the integrity knight's armor, right before the sword's point.

Eugeo set loose the feverish mass that suddenly swelled out from the depths of his stomach, threatening to even tear his throat apart, in a single breath.

"Binding! Binding up a girl of merely eleven in chains... and hanging her off a flying dragon as you took her away... someone like you has absolutely no right to use such wordssss——!!"

Eugeo raised the Blue Rose Sword up high in a reverse grip.

He wanted to thrust through the mouth belonging to the knight that spewed those utterly unforgivable words all the way into the ground, dissipating what was left of his Life at the same time.

However, a severe and throbbing pain hindered his right hand from moving. It was not his right eye that hurt, but somewhere deep within his chest. It was a sort of pain that felt as though someone was frantically trying to pull Eugeo back.

With the sword still held aloft, Eugeo, his body trembling strongly, had his right arm—

Gently held back by Kirito's left hand, reaching out from beside him.

".....Why, did you stop me, Kirito..."

Swaying in the maelstrom of his emotions, on the verge of losing all sense of reason, Eugeo questioned his partner, the person he trusted over any and everyone else in the world.

Kirito stared hard at Eugeo with eyes tinged with a pain he had personally endured, slowly shaking his head left and right.

"That mister has already lost his spirit to fight. You mustn't turn your sword onto an opponent like that..."

"But... but this person... this person was the one who took Alice away... this person..."

Offering rebuttals like a spoiled child, a part of Eugeo's mind had already understood what Kirito was trying to say.

The integrity knights, too, were primarily nothing more than existences mobilized by orders from the Axiom Church—orders from the highest minister. The one who abducted Alice was the church itself, a result of this world's distorted law and order.

But on the other hand, the urge to abandon the righteous standpoint and mince the collapsed knight into remnants did not disappear. The feelings of rage, powerlessness, and guilt that had piled up since that summer day were not of a degree capable of vanishing simply by finding out about the contrivances behind the world after all this time.

Toppled wicker basket at his feet. Bread and cheese defiled by sand. Ice melted by sunlight.

Chains with a dull gleam constricting Alice's blue one-piece dress. And his two feet, immobile as though roots grew from them.

...Kirito—Kirito.

You would probably have tried to hack away at the integrity knight and help Alice back then. You would have done it even knowing that you would be arrested and sent for a trial.

But I couldn't. Despite how Alice was my only friend, a girl more important than anyone else, I couldn't do anything but watch. Watch as this knight, now collapsed here before my eyes, bound Alice and took her away.

A storm of emotions, filled with such fragmentary thoughts, swept through the entirety of his mind. The right arm restrained by Kirito trembled, the sword was brandished ever higher.

However, the words Kirito spoke while focusing strength into his left hand surprised Eugeo enough to make him freeze for a moment

"...I'm sure this mister doesn't remember it. The time he took your Alice away from Rulid Village... Not that he forgot it, but that his memory was erased."

"Eh...?"

Eugeo looked downwards at the helmet of the collapsed knight in astonishment.

The integrity knight hadn't stirred the slightest bit, even with the Blue Rose Sword pointed at him, now moved for the first time upon receiving stares from the pair. Forcibly opening his left fist, where the frost had finally thawed, he let go off the long bow while scattering ice fragments, and released the latch at the side of the helmet with his fingertips.

The helmet, constructed to appear menacing, opened as though to split apart, front and back, and now peeled off the knight's head, falling with a thud. What appeared was the face of a male who was the very image of perseverance, around the age of forty.

His hair, cut short, and thick eyebrows were an ashen-red similar to rusted iron. His high nose bridge and pursed lips were straight like a cut from a knife while the sharpness of his eyes brought to mind the steel of arrowheads.

However, his deep gray eyes alone revealed the unrest within his heart, slightly wavering. The thin lips moved and the voice that streamed out was completely different from how it had been until now, a low tone with depth.

"...It is... as that black-haired youngster has mentioned. You say I captured a young girl and took her away on a flying dragon? I have no recollection of carrying out such a deed."

"No... no recollection...? It was only eight years ago..."

Muttering in a daze, strength leeched from Eugeo's right arm without his notice. Touching his chin as though sunk in thought with the left hand that he now detached from Eugeo, Kirito spoke once more.

"Like I said, they were erased... your memories of the whole deed, from beginning to end. Mister... no, Knight Deusolbert, you were the integrity knight who protected the remote northern region, north of Norlangarth, am I correct?"

"...Indeed. The Northern Norlangarth Seventh Remote Region was... the region I oversaw. Yes... that was, until eight years ago..."

The knight's eyebrows strongly rose together, as if they were trying to dredge something up from the deepest depths of his memories.

"And I... was bestowed with this armor along with the duty of guarding the Central Cathedral... due to a great achievement..."

"Do you recall what that achievement was?"

The knight could not give an immediate answer to Kirito's question. His lips pressed tightly together, his sight wandering about. What broke the short silence were words from Kirito once again.

"I'll answer that for you. Your achievement was searching out Integrity Knight Alice Synthesis Thirty. At a small village at the end of the northern region, somewhere no one knew about from the central capital. Even though the highest minister, Administrator, credited the achievement of bringing Alice to this tower to you, she also had to erase all memories regarding this incident from you... The reason for that was mentioned by you yourself earlier."

Without anyone noticing, Kirito continued talking, in a quick tone that was quicker than both Eugeo and the integrity knight, as though he was speaking to himself.

"Integrity knights have no history, they were summoned from the Celestial World, after all; that's what you said. That must have definitely been what the highest minister taught you immediately after you woke up as a knight. That's why you have no memories from before you became an integrity knight; that's how she persuaded you. But to persist with that story, it would be a problem not only if integrity knights had memories from their human lives remaining, but also if they had memories concerning the birth of a new knight aside from themselves. It would be chaos if a major criminal that you brought in yourself suddenly appeared as a fellow knight the next day, after all... there lies the highest minister's weakness..."

Thinking through various facets at a monstrous speed, Kirito began pacing left and right while looking downwards.

With all of his will draining from him while he looked at his partner's state, Eugeo took a long breath while taking another look at the male lying at his feet. When he did, Integrity Knight Deusolbert, too, appeared to be sunk in his thoughts with a blank expression.

It wasn't like his rage and hatred had vanished, but if his memories regarding Alice had truly been erased without a trace, then he had no choice but to accept it—perhaps.

That all the knights were nothing more than pawns manipulated by that one who served as the highest minister of the Axiom Church, Administrator. That the hateful enemy who stole Alice from him, stole her memories from her, and nurtured her into an integrity knight was all a single person, Administrator.

Perhaps noticing Eugeo's gaze looking down upon himself, Deusolbert's eyes ceased wandering. The emotions likely swirling within his chest were unreadable, but the voice that flowed from his lips was in a complete stammer, a voice that made one want to question whether he truly was the same person as that formidable opponent who had stood before the pair, sheer minutes ago.

"That shouldn't... be possible... How could we integrity knights be denizens of the Human World like the rest of you before we were appointed as knights.....?"

"....."

Substituting Eugeo who was at a loss for words, Kirito answered again.

"The blood that flows from that wound of yours is red, just like ours, isn't it? And Knight Eldrie becoming strange that time wasn't because of some dodgy art cast on him either. It was because we tried to call back the memories stolen from him. ...You ought to be the same as Eldrie also. I don't know whether you achieved victory at the Four Empire Unity Tournament or held disdain for the Taboo Index, but you had your important memories stolen by Administrator with the loyalty towards the church planted in their place and was turned into an integrity knight. You mentioned that you would be penalized by getting frozen, but Administrator-sama would probably be altering your memories during that time and erasing your memories of this conversation too. I'd even bet on it."

The way Kirito expressed it was blunt, but his voice was mingled with melancholy.

Perhaps the knight felt that as well, as he shut his eyelids and kept silent for a while, but he slowly then shook his head once more.

"I am unable to believe it. How could Her Eminence, the highest minister... cast such an art upon....."

"But that's reality. There ought to be something left within you as well. An important memory from before you became a knight, one that cannot be expunged by any art ritual..."

When Kirito approached it from that angle, Deusolbert suddenly raised his left hand up and stared at his burly fingers as he softly murmured in a sigh.

"Ever since I have descended into the Human World... I have always seen this same dream, time after time... A petite hand shaking me awake... and a silver ring worn on one of those fingers... Yet when I awake... there is never anyone..."

Deusolbert's eyebrows squeezed together and he firmly pressed his left hand down upon his forehead. Kirito stared fixedly at that scene, but soon muttered softly.

"You probably can't remember any more than that. Your memories of the one whose hand and ring that belonged to was stolen by Administrator..."

Keeping silent for a moment, he returned the lowered black sword in his right hand back into its sheath attached to the left of his waist with a clink.

"...You decide what to do from now on. Whether to return to Administrator's side to receive your punishment, or to heal your injuries and chase after us... or maybe..."

Cutting short there, Kirito took several steps towards the staircase that stretched upwards from the right side of the landing. Coming to a halt there, he twisted over his shoulder and looked Eugeo in the eye.

—Wasn't that enough?

His black eyes spoke thusly. Eugeo turned his gaze towards the integrity knight, collapsed on the ground with his eyes shut, once again. He slowly raised the Blue Rose Sword in his right hand—and aligned its tip with the sheath on the left of his waist, gently dropping it in.

"...Let's go."

Taking his place beside Kirito, he curtly spoke and they began walking towards the ascending stairs together.

It was unknown which decision Integrity Knight Deusolbert Synthesis Seven would pick, but at the very least, it seemed it wouldn't be the one to chase after the pair.

Part 2

The sound of the pair's soles striding up the marble stairs reverberated alone for a brief period of time.

Without that, their surroundings would be engulfed in a silence, piercing enough to hurt one's ears. There should be a great number of ascetics and their apprentices living in the giant tower of the Axiom Church, according to the extent of Eugeo's knowledge, but he could sense nothing close to any human presence, no matter how hard he strained his ears or focused his eyes.

Additionally, the sight that greeted him at each new floor he climbed up—a rectangular hall with corridors stretching left and right, doors lined up in identical intervals along them—was practically indistinguishable, giving him the impression that an illusory art had been placed on them unseen, making them ascend and descend the same staircase over and over again.

He wanted to try entering one of the corridors and opening a nearby door to ascertain that was not the case, but Kirito silently kept up his constant pace in front, so he told himself not to get distracted. If Deusolbert's words proved true, even stronger enemies would be awaiting them on the fiftieth floor of the cathedral, somewhere a little higher on this staircase.

Gently touching the grip of his beloved sword swaying at the left of his waist, at the moment Eugeo tried to shake away his idle thoughts, Kirito's feet came to an abrupt stop immediately before reaching the landing.

Turning around with a serious expression, he spoke with a tense tone, going,

"Hey, Eugeo. .....Which floor are we on now...?"

"Hey... hey now."

After an instinctive, slight stumble, Eugeo breathed a sigh, shook his head, and dropped his shoulders, all at the same time.

"It's the twenty-ninth floor next. I thought it might be the case, but to think you really weren't counting."

"Don't you think it would only be proper to have floor indicators on the staircase, normally?"

"That might be true, but you still should have noticed it after all this time!"

Tuning out Eugeo's gesture as though it didn't concern him, Kirito leaned his back onto the landing's wall with a thump.

"Nonetheless, we're still that far, huh... I thought we had gone pretty high up too... I'm getting hungry..."

"...Well, you aren't alone on that one."

Close to five hours had already passed since they were treated to that luxurious breakfast in Cardinal's Great Library Room. Solus was approaching the center of the sky from what could be seen through the long and thin window, and with how they had climbed twenty-five floors, which would be a thousand steps, in addition to going through a single, intense battle, it was certainly unavoidable that their bodies were demanding replenishments.

Nodding at Kirito's words, Eugeo followed up by holding his right hand out without reserve.

"So, hand over one of those in your trouser pockets."

"Eh... no, these are, well, for emergency use, so... —Your eyes are unexpectedly sharp, huh."

"There's no way I wouldn't have noticed with how stuffed those are, right?"

Kirito thrust his hand into his right pocket with what seemed like resignation on his face, before taking two steaming manjuu out and tossing one of them over. Upon catching it, there was a savory aroma that provoked his stomach despite the sizable time that had passed since they had left the library room.

"It got burnt a little with that old man's blazing attack."

"Ha-Hah... so that's why. Thanks for the food."

The manjuu was created by Cardinal via a high ranking sacred art, so that meant it had originally been pages from a precious, old book, but Eugeo closed his eyes to that fact and bit into it. He momentarily savored the crunchy grill marks on its skin and the juicy minced meat filling in a trance.

The modest lunch was finished in a few tens of seconds; Eugeo licked his fingers and breathed a short sigh. There was still a suspicious lump in

Kirito's left pocket, but he decided to leave that alone while calling out to his partner who had also finished eating.

"That was good. —So, what's the plan from now on? We'll reach the fiftieth floor in question if we climb for another thirty minutes, but... are we going to charge in from the front?"

"Nn..."

Kirito mussed up his hair as he groaned.

"That's right... —We found out just how scary an integrity knight can be earlier, but judging from what I saw in the battle between you and that old man, rather than those guys not being used to consecutive skills, they really don't have any experience with them, I guess. I want to believe that we have a chance of winning if we bring it into a one-on-one melee. But with several of them there, not to mention how they're fully prepared and awaiting us, that would be hard to set up."

"Then... let's give up on going in from the front and search for another route?"

"I wonder about that. Even Cardinal declared that this grand staircase was the only route and even if we found a secret passage, there's still the danger of getting caught in a pincer attack before long... I hope to defeat the knights on the fiftieth floor without running away elsewhere, somehow. So that would bring us to having to use our trump card, but we have the time to prepare that draggy, long art ritual, thanks to the warning that old man gave us."

"I see... The «armament full control art»..."

When Eugeo muttered it, Kirito nodded with a complex expression.

"I'm worried about using it in an actual fight without practice, but wasting our swords' Life on a trial shot at a place like this would just be... We'll use the full control art together, before we dash onto the fiftieth floor and try to render as many knights powerless as possible..."

"Aah, there's something I have to say about that, Kirito."

With just a little awkwardness, Eugeo cut into Kirito's words.

"That is... It doesn't feel like my full control art will be a high impact direct attack like the integrity knight's skill earlier."

"Eh... r-really?"

"You see, the one who wrote the art ritual for me was Cardinal... I was the one who thought up the type of skill, but still..."

Kirito tilted his head as he spoke to Eugeo, his murmurs full of excuses.

"Well, try reciting the art ritual for now. Without the opening line."

"Y-Yeah."

He rapidly chanted the art ritual as he was told to, with the «system call» omitted. Kirito, who listened with his eyes shut, went against expectations and smirked after Eugeo reached the final line, "Enhance armament".

"So that's it. True, it can't quite be called offensive, but it's useful enough, depending on how it's used. And it doesn't seem to go too badly with my full control art."

"Oh? What's your skill, Kirito?"

"That's something for you to look forward to."

Eugeo lightly scowled at Kirito, tossing out that glib line. However, his partner combed his forelocks upwards with a composed face, leaning his back against the wall once more.

"Well, I can't call it a real strategy, but let's go with it. First, we chant the armament full control art just before we charge onto the fiftieth floor, leaving it in standby before activation. Then upon dashing in and confirming their positions, you first hit them with your skill, then I will with mine. If everything goes well and the enemies are gathered in the same place, we might even render all of them helpless."

"Might, huh."

He agreed doubtfully, but to be honest, Eugeo didn't have a plan of his own. He couldn't help but admit his partner had a better aptitude for creating a plan with all factors accounted for and he was frankly thankful for being able to chant the art ritual before the battle, with his lackluster confidence in reciting it quickly.

"...Then, let's go with that. First, I will..."

As he spoke, Eugeo casually turned his vision towards the left, at the stairs continuing to the cathedral's twenty-ninth floor.

And he opened his eyes wide in amazement.

Two petite heads were peeping out from the shadows surrounding the railings, their four eyes staring intensely in their direction.

The instant their eyes met with Eugeo's, the two heads tucked in with a flash. But as he continued to gaze on, speechlessly, the heads appeared once again, their still-innocent pair of eyes blinking steadily.

Realizing something had happened, Kirito followed Eugeo's sight and after also leaving his mouth agape, he hesitantly asked.

"Who are... you two?"

With that, the two heads met each other, nodded in sync, and nervously revealed themselves entirely.

"Ki... kids...?"

Eugeo muttered, unthinkingly.

The ones who stood on the floor above were two girls clad in exactly the same ink-black clothes.

Their ages appeared around ten. He felt a tinge of nostalgia, for the plain black clothes were greatly similar to the religious habit belonging to Selka, Alice's little sister, who studied at the church in Rulid.

However, unlike Selka, the girls wore short-swords with an overall length of around thirty cen on their green belts. A moment of wariness welled up, but he immediately noticed not only their blade, but their grips as well, were made from a reddish wood. The hue was unusual, but it was likely similar to the wooden swords granted to children aiming to become swordsmen.

The girl on the right had her pale light brown hair in two braids. Her droopy-looking eyebrows along with the corners of her eye gave an impression of meekness. Contrasting with that, the girl on the left had her straw colored hair cropped short, her two eyes accented upwards in resolve.

As Eugeo and Kirito stared on in silence, the one who took a step forward was the spirited, strong-minded girl on the left as expected. Taking in a deep breath of air, she suddenly began her self-introduction.

"Erm... I'm-I'm Fizel[6], a sister apprentice of the Axiom Church. And this girl here is also a sister apprentice..."

"Li... Linel."

The pair's childish voices ended on a quavering note, perhaps due to their uneasiness. Eugeo showed a smile meant to reassure them and immediately realized he might be seen as hostile, considering they were sisters of the church, even if they were still apprentices.

However, the words spoken by the girl who called herself Fizel were more straight to the point than Eugeo would have expected.

"So... are the intruders from the Dark Territory supposed to be the two of you?"

"Hah...?"

Kirito's and his face instinctively met. His partner, too, was unable to come to a decision on how to handle this situation. His lips flapped endlessly with his eyebrows knitted, and then he swiftly moved and slunk behind Eugeo's back.

"I'm bad with kids. I'll leave this to you."

Told that from behind, he wished to whisper "That's unfair!" back, but hiding behind Kirito wasn't quite possible now. Looking at the two girls on the floor above, he gave a stifled reply.

"Er... erm, well... we ought to be humans from the Human World, but... the part about us being intruders is, well, not exactly wrong, I guess..."

This time, the children huddled their foreheads together upon hearing that and began to exchange words in hushed voices. They were soft, but still audible due to how the surroundings were far too silent.

"What's with that, they just look completely like humans on the outside, Nel. They don't have any horns or tails."

The one who said that, unsatisfied, was Fizel, the girl who seemed strong-minded. The girl named Linel argued back falteringly.

"I-I only said what was written in the books. You're the one at fault for thinking they would really have them, Zel."

"Hmm, still, they might just be hiding them. Maybe we can tell if we get closer?"

"Eeh, but they just look like normal humans. But... maybe it's possible that they have fangs..."

The charming conversation reminded Eugeo of the twin daughters of the Wolde farm where he had once freeloaded, and his lips truly went slack this time round.

If Kirito and himself were kids of that age and found out there were intruders from the land of darkness nearby, there was a high possibility they would have gone and sneaked a peep like this. As a result, they would probably have received a harsh scolding from their fathers and the village chief.

Eugeo instantly became worried, having thought of that. Wouldn't the two girls be punished later for coming into contact with rebels against the church? He figured he wasn't in any situation to hold that concern, but still felt that he had to speak.

"Hey... won't they get mad at the two of you for talking to us?"

Upon hearing that, Fizel and Linel promptly closed their mouths and then after, put on smug smiles. Fizel answered, looking just a little jubilant. The politeness in her speech went missing unnoticed.

"All of the brothers and sisters and their apprentices were ordered to lock the door to their own rooms and not leave since this morning. So that means that even if we went to take a look at the intruders, there's no worry of anyone finding out."

"Ha-Hah..."

Somehow, it seemed exactly like a reasoning Kirito would come up with. He could even practically picture that in his mind, how they would get found out in the end and be scolded.

The two girls went into some discussion once again, but Linel was the one who spoke out this time.

"Ermm... are you two of you really not monsters from the Dark Territory?"

"Y-Yeah."

"Then, I'm sorry, but could you allow us to take a closer look at the two of you...? At, erm, your foreheads and teeth."

"Eeh?"

Losing his calm at the unforeseen request, Eugeo glanced behind, but not only did Kirito not send any aid his way, he even feigned ignorance with his head looking elsewhere. Eugeo reluctantly nodded to the girls.

"...Well, if that's all, I don't have a problem with it..."

Being unable to refuse in this situation was partly due to his nature, but there was also his desire to prove that he was a regular human despite being a rebel going against the church and depending on the circumstances, it might even be possible to gain information on the cathedral's interior from the pair.

Fizel's and Linel's faces sparkled and they trotted down the stairs, their gait entwined with curiosity and caution. Their feet stopped upon reaching the landing, their blue and grey eyes pointedly fixed on him.

Eugeo leaned over, combing up the hair on his forehead with his left hand as he bared his teeth for them to see. The children stared at Eugeo for close to ten seconds without blinking a single time, before they finally nodded, apparently satisfied.

"He's human."

"He is, isn't he?"

Such a pronounced disappointment appeared on the pair's faces that he couldn't help but to break into a wry smile. Looking at Eugeo doing that, Linel inclined her head to the side.

"But if the two of you aren't monsters from the Dark Territory, why would the Central Cathedral believe that the two of you are intruders?"

"E-Erm..."

Even while thinking it would be a turn for the worst one way or another, he figured there wasn't any need to hide after all that had already come to pass and answered honestly.

"...A long time ago, a female friend of mine was taken away by an integrity knight. So, I came here to take her back."

This, in particular, must have been hard for an ascetic apprentice, who would normally believe firmly in the Axiom Church's sense of justice, to accept. He expected expressions of disgust and dismay to show up on those young faces, but contrary to that, the girls simply nodded curtly. The girl with straw-colored hair, Fizel, spoke with a slightly disgruntled face.

"So that's it. That was a pretty normal reason."

"N-Normal?"

"There were a few cases of people arranging protests against the church when their family or lovers were taken away, recorded in the past. The two of you are probably the first to actually get in here like this, though."

Following on, Linel picked up the flow from the side.

"Not to mention how they said you cut the spirit-iron chains and escaped once you were imprisoned, and that part about managing to defeat two integrity knights too, which made us wait here, thinking there were definitely monsters of darkness... maybe even a genuine darkness knight launching an attack. But to think you were just normal humans..."

The kids exchanged looks and went, "Is this enough?" and "It is, right?", as they lightly nodded to each other.

Linel, who looked at Eugeo once more, tilted her small head as her pigtails swayed.

"Then, last of all, could you tell us your names?"

There's more that I wanted to ask, though, thought Eugeo as he replied.

"I'm Eugeo. The one behind me is Kirito."

"Hmph... you don't have a family name?"

"Ah, yeah. I'm a child of the pioneers, you see. ...Could it be the same for the two of you too?"

"No, we have one."

Cutting off there, Linel grinned widely. A bright, cherubic one—a smile like her cheeks were stuffed with delicious sweets.

"My name is Linel Synthesis Twenty-eight."

Eugeo couldn't immediately deduce the meaning that name possessed.

At once, a cool chill could be felt at his abdomen and Eugeo turned his vision downwards.

Eugeo wasn't sure when it had been drawn from the belt, but the short-sword gripped in Linel's right hand had its tip sunk about five cen into his body.

It appeared to be only a wooden sword when worn in her belt, but it seemed what he truly thought was the blade, was actually a wooden scabbard. The real blade drawn out from there was not wooden. It was a murky-green, unfamiliar metal. Its surface caught the sunlight shining in from the window and gleamed as though it was wet.

"Eu...!"

Was that short utterance Kirito's voice? Turning his rigid neck behind him, he saw his partner frozen, with his right foot a step forward. Fizel, who was beside Linel only a moment before, was now standing diagonally behind Kirito, with that same green sword thrust into that black coat. The shape of her mouth that made up that smile was the same spirited one as earlier, just as jubilant.

"—And, I'm Fizel Synthesis Twenty-nine."

The short-swords were drawn out from Eugeo's and Kirito's bodies at the same time. Fizel and Linel gave the swords a flick faster than the eye could perceive and shook off the red blood cleanly, then neatly stored them in their respective scabbards.

The chill creeping in from the injury in his abdomen spread throughout his body in an instant. The places that freezing coldness assailed went numb one after another.

"You... two... integri... ty..."

Right after he had somehow forced out those words, his tongue went numb and he was completely petrified.

His knees gave way without warning and Eugeo dropped to the floor like a sack. His chest and left cheek crashed heavily onto the marble, but pain, as well as his entire sense of touch, was absent.

Immediately after, Kirito tumbled over with a thud.

Poison—

Eugeo realized, though it was already too late, and tried to think of a countermeasure.

He had generally studied about forms of poison in nature and and their antidotes from the Sword Mastery Academy lectures. However, all of those were only measures for cases when one was affected by poison from plants, snakes, or insects, not in preparation for getting attacked by venom in the midst of battle like this.

That was only natural. Battles were competitions of valor and grace where the academy, no, the Human World was concerned, so an act like adding venom to weapons would have been strictly prohibited. He heard that even the young noble, who had released a venomous insect and tried to hinder Eugeo and Kirito from taking part in the Zakkaria Swordsmanship

Tournament, didn't go so far as to coat his sword with poison in the match with Kirito.

As such, the knowledge Eugeo possessed was on the level of knowing what type of herb to apply when stung by some specific venomous insect. Even if he were to discover what variant of venom the girls used, there was no vegetation around, let alone medicinal plants. The final method was to try curing himself via sacred arts, but the usage of art rituals was impossible with his hands and mouth paralyzed.

In other words, if this venom did not merely rob his body of its freedom, but was one that constantly reduced his Life as well, both of their lives would be extinguished before they got halfway up the Central Cathedral.

"You don't have to be so scared, Eugeo-san."

Integrity Knight Linel Synthesis Twenty-eight's voice suddenly trickled down from overhead. Perhaps due to the venom's influence, he heard the sweet voice somewhat distorted, as though he was underwater.

"It's just a paralyzing venom. In the first place, the only difference is whether you die here or on the fiftieth floor."

The click-clacking of her footsteps sounded and a small, light-brown shoe jumped into Eugeo's vision as he remained immobile with his left cheek stuck to the ground. Linel lifted her right foot, and then unreservedly placed its end atop Eugeo's head, moving it here and there as though she was searching for something.

"...Hmm, so there really weren't any horns."

Moving her foot onto his back, she endlessly trampled over both of its sides.

"No wings either, huh. Zel, what about your side?"

"This one's just a human too!"

Likely having examined Kirito the same way outside of his sight, Fizel responded unhappily.

"Ah-ah, and I was hoping to finally see a monster from the Dark Territory too."

"Well, it's alright. If we drag these two to the fiftieth floor and cut their heads off in front of those lame people waiting there, we should be able to get sacred instruments and flying dragons too. Then we can fly over to the Dark Territory and look at the real ones all we want."

"Yep. Right, Nel, let's see who's the first one to get a darkness knight's head!"

Even after all of that, Fizel's and Linel's voices were the very likeness of innocence and Eugeo thought that to be the most unnerving part of it all. How could children like these little girls become integrity knights—no, before that, why were these children in the cathedral?

Eugeo could not see when Linel, who was in front of him, drew her sword. Fizel's agility, having easily defeated Kirito who was a distance away, was even more horrifying.

However, combat skill was not something that would improve without long years of practice and the experience of actual life-and-death battles. The reason why Eugeo could freely handle the Blue Rose Sword, a sacred instrument, would have been due to his experience in patiently swinging an axe at the Gigas Cedar, but Kirito said driving away the goblin group at the northern cave also played a major part.

But no matter how he looked at them, Fizel and Linel were around ten years old and they seemed to have never actually experienced a fight against the Dark Territory monsters too, according to their words.

In that case, through what means did they master their physical movements and sword handling, which were faster than the eye could follow?

However, Eugeo did not let out a single sound about the swirling doubts within his heart.

It seemed the venom had circulated through his entire body, with the sensation of the floor's coldness or the presence of his own body disappearing before he knew it. Linel's small hand grabbed Eugeo's right ankle and he noticed he was being dragged along as his vision reeled around.

Desperately shifting his eyeballs that could hardly move that much towards the left, he spotted Kirito being dragged along like baggage as well. The

paralysis likely reached his face the same as Eugeo, as his partner's expression was blank.

The two young integrity knights dragged Eugeo and Kirito along, the Blue Rose Sword and black sword still within their belts, and began going up the stairs without a care. Their heads were violently lifted and dropped each and every step climbed, but as expected, there was no sense of pain.

He had to find a plan to escape this crisis, but perhaps because the paralyzing venom had assailed even his spirit, Eugeo could sense nothing but a parched emptiness enveloping himself.

He had resolved himself to fight the Axiom Church, but even he didn't think they would have carried out such dreadful manipulation on such children of tender years, molding them into integrity knights. And the humans living in this Human World believed that it was the symbol of absolute goodness and harmony. And had for hundreds of years.

"You think it's weird, don't you?"

Linel's voice suddenly reached his ears, faint laughter accompanying it.

"'Why did children like these became integrity knights?', right? You're going to get killed soon enough, so I'll tell you."

"Nel, isn't there no point in saying that if we're killing them? You're eccentric as always."

"Don't you think going all the way up to the fiftieth floor is boring?—Eugeo-san, we were born and raised here, in this cathedral. We were made by the brothers and sisters in the tower under orders from Administrator-sama, you know. For her «resurrection» sacred art experiments that can recover Life that had been completely lost."

The words coming out from her mouth were unbelievably horrifying, but Linel's voice remained cheerful until the very end.

"It seems children outside receive their sacred task when they're ten, but we were given them at five. Our job was to murder each other. We were given a sword like a toy, far smaller than even this venomous sword, and made to pair up and stab each other."

"You sucked at stabbing, didn't you, Nel. I couldn't stand how much it hurt each time."

Linel responded, unsatisfied, at Fizel's voice that seemed to have joined in.

"That was because of your weird movements, Zel. —I think you two would know after defeating two integrity knights, but humans don't die so easily, do they, Eugeo-san, Kirito-san? It's the same even for kids at merely five years old. Even as we panicked with the need to kill each other quickly, we blindly slashed and stabbed until finally reducing each other's Lives to zero, but Administrator-sama would just resurrect us with sacred arts..."

"And resurrection totally didn't work out at the start too, right? The kids who died normally were still lucky; there were some that exploded into pieces or some that turned into weird lumps of meat or some that became different people when revived, weren't there?"

"Even if it was supposed to be our sacred task, we didn't want to be pointlessly hurt and revived either. We tried out various ways and noticed that getting killed in one hit as cleanly as possible hurt the least and had high chances of resurrection. But that single hit's the hard part, you know. It had to be really fast and smooth, either a stab to the heart or slashing off the head."

"And we succeeded in that at around seven, I think? We practiced all the time while the other kids were sleeping, after all."

There was utterly no sign of his senses returning, but shivers still assailed Eugeo, like goose bumps rising over his entire body.

The reason why Fizel and Linel acquired their frightening physical techniques.

It was from killing each other without cease over many years, or so the girls were saying. Day after day, they swung their swords thinking about how best to sever their friends' lives.

Certainly, with the accumulation of such experience, it might be possible to master the skills required to be conferred the position of an integrity knight even as a child. But on the other hand, these two have definitely lost something essential.

Linel continued in the same cheerful voice even as she incessantly ascended the grand staircase.

"It was around the time we became eight years old that Administrator-sama gave up on the resurrection art experiments. It looked

like perfect resurrection was impossible in the end. Did you know? When your Life becomes zero, loads of white arrows of light rain down and, how do I say this, the insides of your head get sliced away bit by bit. The kids who had their important parts shaved away don't come back the same even if their Life was restored. There were countless times when I lost the last few days of memories after getting revived. —As a result, the thirty of us at the start became just Zel and me at the end of the experiments."

"That big-headed elder told us who had survived to choose our next sacred task, so we said that we wanted to become integrity knights. He got mad when we said that, saying that the integrity knights were guardians of order summoned from the Celestial World by Administrator-sama; that they weren't something children like us could become. And then it ended up as a match against the novice integrity knights at that time. ...What were those guys' names?"

"Erm... Something-something Synthesis Twenty-eight and Twenty-nine."

"Look here, Nel, I'm asking for that something-something part. Oh well, that face the elder had when we cut those arrogant brothers' heads off in one slash was strange, huh?"

Stopping her words there, the girls merrily laughed for a while.

"...And, upon finding out the result, Administrator-sama made us integrity knights as a special case. Replacing the two who died. But she said we lacked the knowledge to take up defense duty like the other knights, so we had to be taught about the law and sacred arts for another two years as sister apprentices... honestly, it's just annoying."

"When we were discussing how we could get flying dragons and sacred instruments quicker, the warning that underlings of the Dark Territory had invaded the cathedral came in, you see. Both Nel and I went, 'This is it!'. We thought that if we caught the intruders and executed them faster than the other knights, Administrator-sama might make us into official knights, so we waited at the stairs."

"I'm sorry about using poison. But we really wanted to bring Eugeo-san and Kirito-san to the fiftieth floor if possible... Ah, please don't worry. We're super good at killing, so it won't hurt."

It seemed the two girls couldn't wait for the moment they cut Eugeo's and Kirito's necks in front of the defense line of integrity knights on the fiftieth

floor much longer. Their lively strides became increasingly light, climbing the stairs astonishingly fast despite dragging their prey along.

Although he had to think up of an escape plan somehow, Eugeo could do naught but listen to what the pair talked about in a daze. Even if his mouth wasn't paralyzed, he believed it was utterly impossible to make these children change their minds through words. The two of them probably don't even possess the concept of good and evil. All the girls obeyed was the orders from the one who «manufactured» them, the highest minister, Administrator—

After they turned for the umpteenth time, the ceiling reflected in Eugeo's opened eyes changed from the underside of the next floor's staircase to a level surface. The staircase likely didn't continue because they had finally reached the fiftieth floor that divided the cathedral into two.

Fizel and Linel's steps came to a halt and they exchanged brief words, "Let's go" and "Yeah", with each other.

There were several minutes until that green sword severed his neck—no, there were probably only seconds. His body showed no sign of his senses returning at all and his fingertips wouldn't move the slightest despite how much he wished it.

The ceiling here was much higher than it had been so far. It was probably twenty mel high at least. The marble canopy far above, colorfully depicted a likeness of the three goddesses of the world's creation and their devotees, arched overhead. The columns that supported the canopy, too, were adorned with countless sculptures, Solus's light lavishly cascaded down onto them through the windows installed to the left and right. It was a somber scene, one fitting of its name, «Grand Cloister of Spiritual Light».

The two girls dragged Eugeo and Kirito along another five mel and their feet stopped there. His body spun half a circle with the force of his right foot thrown out and Eugeo could finally see through the entire grand cloister.

It was dreadfully wide. Likely using up all of this entire cathedral floor, the flooring made from stones of different hues appeared hazy at the corners in the white light. A deep-crimson carpet spread straight towards the wall furthest from the entrance, a grand door that practically seemed built for giants towered at the end. There was no mistake that the stairs continuing to the next floor were beyond that door.

And— Far in front of the door, in the center of the hall, several motionless knights clad in full body armor, exuding an air of intimidation that would let no-one pass as they stood tall, could be seen. Four were lined up at regular distances. One was a little in front.

Every one of the four standing behind were uniformly equipped in armor, gleaming silver, wearing helmets engraved with a cross. The same shape as Eldrie's. Their weapons, too, were the same large straight swords thrust onto the floor, with both hands placed firmly on the pommels.

The one in front had armor with a significantly different design from the four behind. It was completely suffused with a refined orchid radiance and was noticeably more sophisticated as well, while a slender sword that seemed specialized for thrusting skills hung at the waist. What that knight wore could be considered light armor, but the other four were no comparison for the density of resolve that emanated from there. Eugeo couldn't see what lay inside that helmet modeled after the wings of birds of prey, but he believed there was no possibility that the knight was inferior to Deusolbert.

These were the five integrity knights that formed an insurmountable barrier to their aim of the highest floor.

But the ones who were a bigger threat to the lives of Eugeo and Kirito at the present moment were the two children standing right before their eyes.

Triumphantly bending their backs, covered in their plain ascetic clothes, Linel and Fizel confronted the five knights.

"—My, if it isn't Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio Synthesis Two-dono here."

Linel first announced in a cheerful voice.

"It appears the elder must have been rather alarmed as well, to go to the bother of sending «Heaven Piercing Sword» Fanatio-dono here. Or perhaps you are the one panicking here, Fanatio-sama? I suppose you couldn't bear to have «Fragrant Olive»-dono walk off with the position of Deputy Knight Commander with her performance, could you?"

The few tense seconds of silence were broken by the purple knight's rather sharp voice accompanied by a metallic reverberation.

Eugeo felt confident that he sensed hidden irritation behind that muffled echo, unique to integrity knights, that didn't seem to originate from a human.

"...Why are you young apprentices in this battlefield of honorable knights?""

"Aha, that's soo lame!"

Fizel quickly shouted back in an unreserved tone.

"It's because you bring stuff like honor and dignity into fights, that two of your all-powerful, able-to-match-a-thousand integrity knights have lost, heh. But rest assured, so that you esteemed knights don't suffer any further disgrace, we have caught the intruders for you!"

"We'll be cutting the intruders' heads off now, so please look closely and report it to the highest minister. I suppose the honorable integrity knights wouldn't even imagine about stealing our achievement, am I right?"

Eugeo couldn't help but be dumbfounded at the girls' guts despite the perilous situation he was in, as Linel and Fizel spoke with even less restraint while the five integrity knights, possessing superhuman strength, faced them.

No—that might be a little off.

Could that prominent emotion hovering behind the children's small backs be hatred...?

Lying on the floor, Eugeo issued his strength to the only part that could move, his two eyes, and stared at Linel and Fizel. But still, what was their hatred directed towards? Despite appearing before the major criminals who had rebelled against the Axiom Church and highest minister, Administrator, the girls had showed nothing but pure curiosity.

Linel and Fizel, openly expressing both hatred and contempt, glared at the integrity knights, and the knights looked back at the two children with irritation, as Eugeo looked up at the children, harboring doubts in his mind, so—

Until the instant that black-clothed shadow appeared behind the children without a sound, there was likely not a single being who had detected its movement.

Kirito, who should have been affected by the paralyzing venom like Eugeo, approached from behind the two girls with the smoothness of a shadow panther on the prowl, and took the venomous swords hanging on their waists by their hilts: Fizel's in his right hand, Linel's in his left. With that, he drew the swords upwards and linked it to a shallow slash on each of the children's exposed left arms.

The children only managed to turn to look back with blank faces after Kirito landed from a long jump backwards, with the short-swords still in his hands.

Vacant expressions of surprise appeared on Linel's and Fizel's innocent faces.

"Why..."

"Move..."

The venom's effects manifested immediately and the children tumbled onto the floor softly after voicing that much.

Kirito got up as though he was their substitute. He held both of the venomous swords together in his left hand and searched through Linel's ascetic clothes with his right after walking up to her. The object he instantly picked out was a tiny bottle the size of his fingertips, stoppering an orange-colored fluid.

Flicking off the cork and putting it to his nose, he nodded as though convinced, then walked on. Eugeo couldn't do anything but to believe the fluid, gently flowing from the bottle that drew close to his lips, was an antidote and drank it down. It was likely for the best that he had no sense of taste.

Kirito, displaying a rare sort of grimness on his face, whispered in an extremely soft voice while still on his knees.

"The paralysis will be cured in a few minutes. When your mouth can move, be sure to start chanting the armament full control art without the knights' notice. Keep on standby when you're done preparing and wait for my signal."

Getting up after saying only what he needed to, Kirito moved to the girls' side once again. He shouted out towards the five integrity knights still standing a distance away in a strained, loud voice.

"Knight Kirito, as well as Knight Eugeo, would like to extend our deepest apologies for the disrespect of looking on while lying down at the side! In addition to that disrespect, I beg for you to grant a deferment for us to redress our disgrace! I propose we cross swords after that hiatus!"

The purple knight, who was probably of a rather high rank, immediately replied in a dignified tone.

"I am the second of the integrity knights, Fanatio Synthesis Two! Criminals, my sacred instrument, «Heaven Piercing Sword», doesn't possess a single drop of mercy, so declare your last words if you have any, while this sword remains sheathed!"

Upon hearing that, Kirito instantly looked down at the two girls collapsed beside him and hit out with his words, loud enough for even the knights to hear.

"—I believe you think it's weird, don't you? About why I could move."

Chagrin dyed Linel's eyes as the words she had personally spoken earlier were stolen.

"The two of you fumbled your words earlier. You said all of the brothers and sisters were ordered not to leave their rooms. There shouldn't be anyone who can disobey an order within the cathedral. Hence, that proved you were not actual sister apprentices since you hadn't abided by the order."

A prickling pain crawled around his limbs, perhaps because his senses had started to return thanks to the medicine, but Eugeo took nearly no notice of it. He finally understood what emotion was hidden behind his partner's expression.

Despite his usual character, that Kirito—was enraged.

But it didn't seem that rage was directed towards the children. After all, a considerable level of sympathy could be seen in his eyes as they were cast down at Linel and Fizel.

"Besides, there're those scabbards on your waists. Those were made from the «ruby evergreen oak» in the south, right? That is the only material that would not rot when in contact with these swords made from the «poison steel from Ruberyl». There was no way mere sister apprentices could have something like these. Thus, I chanted an art to counteract the poison

before the two of you got closer. It did take quite some time for it to finish, though. ...Strength isn't purely based on how fast you can swing your swords. To sum it up, the both of you were foolish; foolish enough to deserve dying here right this instant."

Kirito coldly told the two girls and raised the poison swords held in his left hand up high.

The two swords traced a green flash as they flew from his hand, thrown down without any hesitation. They buried themselves with a dull noise, into the stone floor at the tip of Linel's and Fizel's noses.

"But I won't kill you. In exchange, watch closely at just how strong the integrity knights you ridiculed are."

He turned aside after those few words and proceeded several steps forward.

Kirito slowly turned the black sword that glided from its scabbard with a sharp sound and brandished it in front of himself.

"—I apologize for the wait, Knight Fanatio! Knight Kirito stands before you!!"

He's overdoing it... regardless of what the circumstances may be.

He thought to cry those words out at his partner's back, but Eugeo's lips merely trembled slightly. His senses were returning, but his voice was still locked away.

Kirito had always borrowed those weapon listings from the academy's library he held an interest in, so that was likely where he had gained the knowledge of the «ruby evergreen oak» and «poison steel». With his inherent insight added in, Kirito might have escaped from the trap laid by Linel and Fizel, but it was clear that they had been plunged into an even more perilous plight due to the children. After all, they had to engage strong opponents in direct combat: five integrity knights, with one among them at the position of Deputy Knight Commander. The plan of discussing their actions and chanting the full control art in advance, before charging into the grand cloister, was naturally voided.

The usual Kirito would have dragged Eugeo along as he fled without a tinge of hesitation, rearranging the circumstances to make it the slightest bit more advantageous. As expected, the reason why he didn't was

because he wasn't in his normal state. If he stared hard, he could practically see a profound anger stirring Kirito up, bluish-white flames upon the black shirt on his back.

Even the instructors at the Sword Mastery Academy would have been overpowered if they had confronted Kirito, as he currently was, head-on. However, as expected of one who was the integrity knight's second in command, the purple knight named Fanatio grasped the hilt of that slender sword on the left waist in a dignified motion. When it was unsheathed with a clear sound, a dazzling radiance, as though the blade itself was emitting light, struck Eugeo's eyes.

Following Fanatio, the four integrity knights behind reversed their great swords thrust into the floor and brandished them in a neatly coordinated motion. The resolve felt welling from their swords rippled the air in the hall as it pushed against Kirito's.

Fanatio, who didn't show the slightest bit of liveliness despite the strained situation, let loose a voice with a somber ring to it from under the helmet.

"Criminal Kirito, it appears you desire an individual match with me... but unfortunately, we have been strictly ordered to use all means to erase the both of you if you were to reach this cloister. Hence, I shall have them serve as your opponent first. —The «Four Oscillation Blades» personally tempered under my instruction, that is!"

Fanatio loudly declared, then started with rapid chanting of a complex sacred art that began with system call. It was likely, no, unmistakably the armament full control art. The only means to counter were to use the same art as well, or to cut the knight down before it was finished.

Kirito chose the latter. As he rushed at Fanatio with enough force to make sparks scatter from his soles' hobnails, he swung his black sword overhead.

However, the knight who stood at the left, among the four in wait behind Fanatio, began an assault at the same time. The great sword held with both hands cleaved horizontally from the left with a heavy groan, advancing on Kirito.

Kirito changed his sword's orientation, receiving the knight's attack with a downwards swing from overhead. An ear-piercing crash resounded. Both were repelled backwards, widening the gap.

Kirito's recovery was quicker in comparison to the knight, hurriedly trying to pull the huge sword back. He had already entered the stance to pursue upon landing, and with just a single lunge more at his opponent's chest—

"......!?"

—Eugeo's breath immediately escaped after he believed that. He didn't know when it had happened, but a second knight had rushed in and released an all-out horizontal slash from the left.

Kirito stopped his feet and this time, his sword slashed up towards the left and repelled the enemy's sword. There was the same metallic noise and abundant spray of sparks as earlier, and the two opened up a distance of approximately four mel.

The second knight's stance, too, was severely demolished. It was only natural, holding one's ground after being repelled from dealing an all-out attack with a sword that huge would be difficult regardless of how much physical strength one had. What should be praised, however, was Kirito's expertise, for repulsing the opponent's sword with a complete minimum of motion and gracefully absorbing its recoil, shifting into the next offensive stance immediately after.

However.

Without being giving even the time to consider the potentiality, Eugeo saw a third knight lunging at Kirito once again, directly after he landed. Before his sight was taken by the collision between sword and sword for the third time, Eugeo forced his eyes to the rear.

"——!!"

And he ground his teeth. In that moment Kirito crossed swords with the third knight, the fourth was already beginning to rush forth.

How could they predict Kirito's movement so accurately? Kirito's reaction finally became erratic from the consequent horizontal cleave. Although he did succeed in intercepting it somehow, his black-clothed frame swayed in the air, perhaps due to the force he was pushed back by.

——I see.

It took too long, but Eugeo noticed the four knights' intent.

All of the knights' attacks were horizontal slashes from left to right. Parrying that with his sword would restrict the direction to which he would be repelled, to a certain degree. With that as their aim, the next knight would repeat the horizontal slash. The wider range when compared to thrusts and vertical swings, along with the blade's length, could provide a rough estimate that was sufficient for them to catch Kirito within the reach of their slashes, even if it was done in advance.

It was a supposed «consecutive hits skill via a group» from the integrity knights who shouldn't have secret moves with consecutive hits. They really were different from the swordsmen in the capital who purely pursued the beauty of styles, they were true warriors hardened through actual battles in the Dark Territory.

However, the knights' coordinated tactic was not perfect either.

—Notice it, Kirito, there's a way to get through it if you do!

A hoarse groan seeped out from Eugeo's throat as he tried to shout. His tongue and lips were finally starting to move. As he moved his mouth in a desperate bid to loosen those stiff muscles, to start on the art ritual even a moment quicker, Eugeo frantically prayed as he looked on at his partner. For him to notice it.

Having parried the fourth knight's sword, Kirito slipped up in his landing at last, thrusting a single hand onto the floor.

The first knight's sword roared as it launched an assault, thrusting in after recovering from the impact.

Kirito immediately slumped his upper body backwards, slipping under the sword. A section of his black hair made contact with the blade and was scattered away.

Yes—If the incoming attack was certain to be a horizontal slash, he would simply have to dodge above or below it instead of deflecting it with his sword.

But that evasion has to be combined with a counterattack. If he were to fall down, there would be a short pause, no, something longer than that before he could take action again.

It appeared the second knight approaching from Kirito's left had absolutely no intention of missing that pause. Nimbly shifting the sword that was pointed sideways up, the knight executed a vertical slash at full power.

"D...!!"

Danger, Eugeo tried to shout, ignoring the sharp pain running through his throat. However, it wasn't in time. It was when he instinctively averted his eyes, not expecting him to be able to dodge—

The initial knight who just completed the sword swing on Kirito's right shook violently.

Kirito wasn't merely sprawled over. His two legs had clutched around the knight's unnoticed, pulling the knight down atop himself.

The second knight could not stop the slash in motion and the great sword's blade buried itself deeply into his ally's back. The knight who recovered his sword while showing signs of shock was then assaulted by a black flash reaching from below.

Kirito, his lunge accurately stabbing through the knight's two arms as he got up, turned towards the third knight who appeared to be charging forward in disorder and shoved the second away with all the force he had. As expected, the third couldn't hack at him along with an ally and halted the slash.

At last, the consecutive attacks from the group Fanatio called the «Four Oscillation Blades» came to an end.

Kirito ran savagely through that gap. Without sparing the four knights even a glance, he launched an attack on Fanatio, chanting the full control art.

Let it reach—!

Eugeo frantically prayed.

"Enhance...!"

Fanatio shouted.

"Uooooh!!"

Kirito howled, his sword raised up high from afar. It wouldn't reach from that distance normally, but the blade released a yellow-green flash immediately after. Aincrad-style secret move, «Sonic Leap». It was a

one-hit vertical slash like «Vertical», but possessed the ability to charge forward from over twice that distance in an instant.

Fanatio turned the slender sword's point at Kirito whose bestial pounce trailed out a path of light. However, it was impossible for such a delicate weapon to ward off the impact from a secret move no matter what was tried. The long sword carved from the Gigas Cedar held a weight higher than the Blue Rose Sword, a sacred instrument. Adding a slashing attack at Kirito's practically godlike speed into the mix, it would be enough to smash something like a slender sword into smithereens, even if there were three of them bundled up together.

It was at the instant when the black-clothed knight reached the peak of his jump and began to swing his sword forward—

A flash came from the slender sword at the knight's hand.

No, to be accurate, the entire blade turned into a bluish-white radiance as it stretched out forward with terrifying agility.

The slender ray of light penetrated Kirito's left flank without a sound, continued onwards towards the sky, and ignited a small explosion as it plunged into the grand cloister's ceiling. That all ended in an instant.

Kirito's secret move had its trajectory upset with his abdomen pierced through, and merely grazed a decorative wing on Fanatio's helmet, forcibly snapping it off into the air.

Barely any blood could be seen flowing from the wound and Eugeo didn't think there was much of a drop in his Life, but Kirito fell onto a single knee upon landing. When he focused his eyes hard enough, he saw pale smoke rising around the small hole opened up in his shirt.

It was probably a flame-type attack? However, the light released from Fanatio's sword was a blinding white that was almost blue. Eugeo had never seen a flame of such color before.

Turning with a motion so refined it was detestable, Fanatio pointed the slender sword's end precisely at Kirito who was crouching on the floor.

With a faint 'sha', the ray of light surged out again. If it wasn't for Kirito springing to the left immediately before that, the light would have likely gone through his right leg. The light ray that precariously missed stabbed

into the marble floor and once again caused a small explosion. When the light faded, a bright-red hole remained melted into the surface there.

"No... way...!"

Eugeo did not notice the jarring, hoarse voice that escaped from his own mouth for a while.

The material used in building the cathedral was marble of the highest grade, like the «immortal walls» that divided Central Centoria as a cross, judging from its pure white hue and glassy glaze. It wasn't something that could be melted despite how hot a flame you used. Hadn't how only the carpet had been burnt when those infernal flames brought forth by Deusolbert's «Conflagrant Flame Bow» had engulfed the surface been enough to serve as evidence for that?

In other words, that would make Fanatio's full control art far mightier than Deusolbert's skill, if it was a flame-type attack. So wouldn't Kirito's Life that suffered a direct hit from such a skill be on the verge of dissipating?

Kirito didn't stay in a single place, continuously jumping in erratic directions as Eugeo looked on tightly gripped in the fist of an ice-cold fear. Light rays flashed out one after another, digging into the ground, as Fanatio's sword chased his figure.

A more horrifying detail of that skill was how it contained absolutely no prior movements before the discharge of light, such as accumulating the light or thrusting the sword. At the very least, Eugeo couldn't guess at when the nonchalantly shifting slender sword would emit the ray of light from his position. Describing it as having an extremely long range would define it at the same level as Eldrie's «Frost Scale Whip», but that was mere child's play when compared to this.

Showing no sign of getting fired up at all, Fanatio continued pursuing Kirito with slick movements like a dance. Kirito could dodge even four, five, six shots of those solely because of his painstakingly tempered physical capability and feral intuition.

However, at last, the light that shot out for the seventh time declared an end to the fatal game of tag.

Shaa! The top of his foot was pierced in midair by the light ray that scorched the air as it shot out, Kirito crashed onto the floor, shoulder first,

his posture crumpling. But still, Fanatio's sword point unwaveringly aimed slightly below the tuft of black hair that was brought up straight away.

"Ki....."

-rito, Eugeo tried to shout before he noticed the numbness of his throat and mouth were finally gone. He might be able to articulate clearly enough to complete the art ritual like this.

Instead of screaming out, Eugeo steadily sent strength to his abdomen and began chanting the art ritual at a volume too soft for the knights to hear, but loud enough to reach the creation goddesses.

"System call..."

Kirito would be able to get through this level of danger on his own. Hence, there was only one thing Eugeo ought to do, to chant the full control art as he was told to, getting it ready to be activated whenever it was needed.

With the sword of certain death pointed straight at Kirito, Fanatio kept quiet for a while, as though to provoke him, before speaking out in a dull voice.

"...I have been given advice, that prattling on at times like this is a bad habit of mine, from the Knight Commander for over a hundred years, but... Still, it feels like such a misery. Every single one of those who have prostrated themselves beneath the authority of my «Heaven Piercing Sword» could show naught but that asinine expression, you see. I suppose you, too, are wondering what exactly is the true form of this technique capable of cornering yourself so easily."

It seemed the four knights under Fanatio had finished treating their casualties in the meantime too, as they were now surrounding Kirito from the back, holding their great swords in one hand. This made it even harder to escape, but it increased the possibility of prolonging Fanatio's small talk accordingly. Concentrating fully on not making a single mistake in his chant in order to avert failure, Eugeo continued stringing the art ritual together with all he had.

"You may be a criminal, but I suppose you know of mirrors if you have lived in the capital?"

Fanatio suddenly asked a question that came out of nowhere and a perplexed expression appeared on Kirito even as he withstood the pain.

Mirrors.

Of course, Eugeo had seen them before as well. There weren't any back home in Rulid, but his personal room in the academy's elite swordsman-in-training dormitory was furnished with a small one. It was a mysterious tool that reflected far more vividly than water surfaces and metal sheets, but Eugeo couldn't quite come to like his own feeble appearance, so he hadn't had much of a craving to peek into it.

With the sword prepared to immediately shoot light at Kirito if he made any movement, Fanatio resumed in a voice that revealed no emotion.

"As it's a highly valued commodity made by pouring melted silver onto glass, I doubt there would be many opportunities for inhabitants outside the capital to lay their eyes on it, but... that tool is able to reflect Solus's light almost perfectly. I wonder if you understand... that is, the reason behind why the area shone on by the reflected light becomes twice as hot. —A hundred and thirty years from now in the past, her eminence, the highest minister, confiscated silver coins and other items made from silver, and commanded glassmakers to create a thousand large panes of glass. They were for an offensive art that required no chanting... an experiment labeled «weaponry» though, you see. The thousand mirrors, lined up to form a half circle in the cathedral's front yard, reflected the midsummer Solus's light and focused it onto a single spot, bringing forth a pure white inferno. That melted a large rock the size of a man in mere minutes."

Weaponry... white inferno...?

Eugeo understood nothing from Fanatio's words. However, he knew by intuition, that the scheme from the highest minister was as horrifying as having children murder each other in order to stabilize the resurrection art.

"—In the end, the eminent highest minister judged that it required too much preparation to get it into a battle-worthy state. However, she mentioned it would be too much of a pity for all of it to go to waste, and with her divine miracles, she gathered every one of the thousand large mirrors, tempered them, and created a single sword. That was this sacred instrument, the «Heaven Piercing Sword». Do you understand, criminal? What pierced through your abdomen and leg was the might of Sun Goddess Solus herself!"

The words from the integrity knight, tinged with a faint haughtiness, were such a surprise that Eugeo narrowly avoided making a blunder on the nearly completed art ritual.

Solus's light gathered by a thousand mirrors—was that supposed to be the true form of that white ray of light?

It was possible to counteract an attack through thermal elements with cryogenic elements. But how could an attack through light be guarded against? In the first place, arts with luminous elements as their source of power should have nearly no direct offensive ability, to the extent of Eugeo's knowledge. A blinding light could be negated with umbra elemental arts, but a light ray on that level would probably pierce through ten or twenty umbra elements thrown at it easily.

Unconcerned with the intolerable unease in his heart, Eugeo's mouth continued constructing the art ritual, half automatically, and finally reached the final line. The power hidden within the Blue Rose Sword would be invoked after chanting the ending phrase, «enhance armament». But that would have to wait for Kirito's signal.

Fanatio appeared to have ran out of things to talk about and slightly thrust the sword pointed at Kirito's head forward.

"Kirito, have you understood the might of my sword that will erase your Life? Then I shall allow you to repent for your sins, entrust your heartfelt faith to the three goddesses, and beg them for their mercy before you die. If you do so, the spiritual light of purification will cleanse the sins of your soul and guide it to the Celestial World. Now—farewell, immature and foolish criminal."

The Heaven Piercing Sword shone dazzlingly, projecting the ray of light that would ring his death knell through his heart.

"Discharge!"

It was in that instant when that scream reached Eugeo's ears.

Directly before Fanatio's sword shone, Kirito slapped his two hands together with a 'pan!' and then held them out in front. What appeared before his palms was a single sheet colored silver.

No, that's not it. It wasn't merely a sheet of metal. The perfectly level, square sheet clearly reflected Fanatio's helmet while the knight stood in front of Eugeo.

Eugeo's eyes had perceived elements of two different hues grasped in those hands before they were slapped together.

The light on the right hand was that of metal elements. It was used to fire needles or create trifling tools, the metallic-type element. And what the left hand held were crystal elements. It was the glass-type element used to create imperceptible barriers and glass cups. With those two formed into the shape of a sheet and layered, the object created was—

A mirror.

The light spear that concealed an extreme heat hit the mirror created by Kirito's art ritual and changed it from silver to orange in the blink of an eye.

The Lives for tools created from elements were after all low. Even if a knife looked the same on the outside, compared to one forged from ore that could last for tens of years, one formed from metal elements would exhaust its Life in only hours and dissipate. That mirror should be no exception, it was highly doubtful it would have the endurance to deflect the Heaven Piercing Sword's light.

As Eugeo's fleeting thought predicted, the mirror survived in the air for only a mere tenth of a second. The glass and metal melted into a fluid that scattered about and the light ray went straight at Kirito, retaining eighty percent of its radiance.

However, the instant's worth of reprieve forcibly brought about wasn't wasted on Kirito either. It was hardly anything, but he succeeded in tilting his frame towards the left and the light singed only a part of his black hair and cheek before it streamed behind him.

And the remaining twenty percent of the light caught by the mirror—

Was deflected at an acute angle and sprung upon Fanatio's helmet.

It shouldn't have been a predictable move, but as expected of the second integrity knight, the light ray was dodged with a head tilt to the right with reflexes on par with Kirito or higher. However, the knight couldn't protect the decorative wings that sprung from either side of the helmet. The decoration on the left was hit by the light and the clasp disintegrated with it—the helmet broke into two, front and back, immediately after.

Eugeo's sight was seized by the abundance of hair that swept into the air in that moment.

It was a deep black like Kirito's hair. But its silkiness was overwhelmingly superior. The flowing wavy long hair, which must have surely been

groomed with tender care, glistened bewitchingly in the midday light from the grand windows.

Why would someone like a knight—

As Eugeo unconsciously wondered that, he could see Fanatio's face quickly being covered with a raised left hand.

And Fanatio shouted.

"You saw, didn't you... cretin!!"

It was utterly different from that metallically warped voice that had come from the helmet previously; it was in a high-pitched tone, both refined and supple.

She's female—!?

The overwhelming surprise drove Eugeo to the brink of releasing his voice, which would break the art ritual's standby status.

He tightly pursed his lips to prevent any unnecessary words from spilling out. However, part of his consciousness was steadfastly drawn towards Knight Fanatio's retreating figure.

Her stature was similar to Kirito or taller, but when he assessed her with that thought in mind, the line tracing from her back to her waist was certainly slender. However, he had been completely convinced she was a man up until now.

They had already encountered knights like Alice Synthesis Thirty, or Linel and Fizel, though they were children, so there was no reason to deny that there were quite a number of females within the integrity knights. In the first place, close to half of the trainees studying in the academy were girls like Tiezé and Ronye. Many integrity knights were produced from their ranks, so there was nothing strange about the second knight being female.

When he pondered on why he was so astonished despite that, Eugeo noticed that it was because Fanatio's speech and behavior up until now had been excessively masculine.

If that was the case, the reason for the anger exuding from Fanatio's entire frame right now was not because her bare face was seen—it might be due to them finding out she was female.

It appeared Kirito, down on the floor with a single knee, had the pain from the burn on his cheek vanish too, as an astonished look showed up on his face.

Glaring at Kirito crouching through the gaps between the fingers on her left hand, Fanatio spoke again.

"So you're... making that sort of face too, huh, criminal. So even you bunch, guilty of high treason against the church, will not fight seriously the moment you know I'm a girl?"

Despite being a lament, practically wrung from herself, her voice was exquisite, bringing to mind stringed instruments played by a virtuoso.

"I am not human... I am an integrity knight summoned to this land from the Celestial World... And yet I have to suffer such scorn from you men, the instant you know me to be female! Not just among my peers... but even from the commander of those incarnations of evil, the darkness knights!!"

—That's not it; neither of us are looking down on you.

After replying thusly in his mind, a thought struck Eugeo.

He had fought many swordswomen during his service as a guard in Zakkaria and while he began studying in the academy. There were several among them who possessed more skill than Eugeo and of course, there were times when he lost against them. Through experiencing all of those battles, Eugeo did not go easy on his opponents just because they were

female and he held respect for experts in the field regardless of their gender.

However—what if it wasn't a match where the competitors won by stopping before making contact or after the first hit, but an actual life-and-death battle? Could he really annihilate his opponent's Life without hesitation...?

It happened when Eugeo was seized by the thoughts he now considered for the first time and lost his breath.

Kirito who was crouching on the floor suddenly became a gust of wind and leapt out.

It was a downwards slash from the right without any trickery or even secret moves. However, the blade moved at an appalling speed that appeared hazy even in Eugeo's eyes. It was like a miracle instead, that Fanatio managed to parry it in time with her heart thrown in disarray. Gaan! An ear-piercing impact echoed through the hall, scattering sparks that vividly illuminated the pair's faces for a moment.

Fanatio skillfully stopped the slash near her slender sword's guard, but she could not soak up the brunt of the charge and was forced back several steps. Kirito locked their swords together and jostled into the female knight's slender body without slackening the pressure. Fanatio's knee, clad in purple armor, began to bend slightly.

Kirito suddenly spoke in a low tone.

"I see, that explains that sword and skill. It's to hide that you're a woman when fighting... that's right, isn't it, Fanatio ojou-sama?"

"You... bastard!!"

Her shout sounded like a scream; Fanatio forced her sword back as they scraped against each other.

When Eugeo turned his sight that was fastened on those two elsewhere, he could feel signs of distress from the four surrounding knights as well. It might be likely, but there could be some among them who did not know Fanatio's bare face. The two girls who were laid paralyzed on Eugeo's right couldn't show any signs of either, however.

Exposing themselves to the knights' eyes, Kirito and Fanatio continued their all-out competition. Kirito was clearly the winner in terms of body weight and sword weight, he guessed. But after getting pushed back once,

Fanatio showed no sign of drawing back with that physical strength unimaginable from her slender arms.

Kirito hurled words at her once again from the gaps in his gritted teeth.

"...I'll say this first, but what I was surprised at just now, was how the resolve in your sword decreased by such a far-fetched amount the instant your helmet broke. Hiding your face, hiding your sword swings... aren't you the one most conscious that you're a woman?"

"Sh... shut up! I'll kill you... I'll definitely kill you at least...!"

"That's what I'm planning on doing too. I have absolutely no plan to go easy on you because you're a woman at all; after all, I've been losing to swordswomen the entire time!"

It was true that Kirito had countlessly been beaten by Sortiliena-senpai, whom he served as a valet, as far as Eugeo knew. But Eugeo believed he wasn't exactly referring to training or practice matches. As if he was saying that he had actually lost to swordswomen elsewhere, in real bouts in the past...

At that moment, Kirito's right leg suddenly sprung forth and tripped Fanatio's legs. Her upper body floundered and the two swords scattered sparks as they parted. Without a moment's delay, he thrust his black sword in with a single hand.

However, the integrity knight's right hand flashed at godlike speed and her slender sword deflected the black sword from the side like a living creature. Straightening her posture while avoiding the thrust's passage, she took a step back to regain some distance.

Kirito's recovery was quick as well. Using the momentum from the thrust, he dove into the opponent's chest in what seemed like a body slam and maintained the close range. After all, long range battles were not feasible against Fanatio who possessed that skill to fire light rays without prior preparation.

An ultra-high speed clash of swords began at near-zero distance.

What frightened Eugeo was how Fanatio dealt with Kirito's disorientating consecutive attacks without retreating by even a step back. The black blade that launched assaults from up, down, left, and right in succession was handled by the slender sword, freely flashing around, retaliating with

thrusts of two or three consecutive hits whenever there was the smallest opening. Neither of the two used secret moves, but that was because they couldn't even find the opening to perform the initial stance.

Every single one of the traditional swordsmanship styles in the Human World possessed only one-hit sword skills and it seemed not even the elderly Integrity Knight Deusolbert knew of consecutive hit skills. That would mean Fanatio worked out consecutive sword skills through her own effort. The reason behind that was definitely not unrelated to Kirito's speech from a while ago.

The light from the Heaven Piercing Sword, to defeat enemies without getting close. Or the consecutive hit skills, to drive enemies away with successive attacks even if she was unable to use the full control art and lost the initiative.

In other words, the female knight, Fanatio, was afraid of enemies getting close to her and noticing what was hidden under her armor.

But why...? Why would she try so hard to hide her own gender?

While reflecting on the new doubt that welled up, Eugeo's eyes were glued to the battle between the pair. It appeared the four knights under Fanatio were the same, they looked over the ferocious fight without moving one bit and with their great swords lowered.

Really now, this is such—

Such a magnificent battle.

At that close distance, both parties hardly moved their feet and continued defending against the barrage of slashes and thrusts darting back and forth just by dodging their bodies or by parrying. The spectacle around the pair was as though a multitude of stars were surging in, rebounding, and vanishing, one after another. Even the clangs of steel clashing against steel had a certain magnificence to it, reminding one of a percussion instrument duet.

A chilling smile crept onto Kirito's face that grew pallid as he executed techniques with such vigor, it was like he completely fused with the black sword. The close range battle should have been able to blockade the opponent's usage of Solus's light, but he currently seemed to be simply immersed in the joy of thrashing out with his tempered sword skills to his heart's content.

On the other hand, Fanatio should have no reason to go along with her opponent. If she were to get one of her subordinates to attack Kirito from behind, take that opening to gain some distance, and fire those light rays again, there would be no possibility of Kirito defending this time.

Despite that, the integrity knight with fluttering black, long hair appeared to be trying to conclude the showdown through direct attacks with her slender sword. Eugeo could not infer the reason for that. Because of anger caused by Kirito's provocation? Her pride as a knight could not forgive retreat? Or perhaps, she, too, had found something of note in this exchange of consecutive hit skills, this transcendental battle?

Eugeo could not see anything but Fanatio's back from his position; he did not know what sort of expression showed upon her face.

Making a guess from her several remarks, he figured Fanatio had served the church as an integrity knight for a hundred and thirty years at minimum, with the possibility of it being more. It was an absurd length of time that Eugeo could not even imagine, with himself unsure if he could even reach nineteen years old.

He had no idea how many years it had been since she had concealed her face and gender, but if she had worked out all of those consecutive sword skills through her own effort, that was not merely ten or twenty years of practice. Kirito could only continue crossing swords with Fanatio right now because he, too, was a user of the rare consecutive hit skills, the Aincrad style. If this was any other swordsman, they would probably have been prostrated on the ground, unable to take even one step within the blade's range.

Hence, Kirito might be the first opponent Fanatio faced who could go up against all of her thoroughly polished sword skills as well.

They might be integrity knights, but the adoration of the beauty and gallantry in using a single hit was evident in Eldrie's and Deusolbert's fighting styles. As such, it was doubtful that Fanatio had displayed her consecutive hit skills in practice with a knight as her partner. She had trained by herself for a long, long time, with no-one but an imaginary shadow; a fellow consecutive hit skill user then appeared, taking the form of an entity named Kirito.

As Eugeo looked on at the pair's superhuman confrontation, his entire body was covered in goose bumps without him noticing it as tears spread from his eyes.

Ever since Kirito began teaching him the Aincrad style, the ultimate battle he visualized in his mind was now being carried out in reality here. It carried not the beauty of a style that continued seeking for vanity, but a raucous beauty acquired purely as the result of seeking to cut one's enemy down.

Fanatio's five consecutive thrusts took on Kirito's five consecutive slashes in succession and the respective swords, strongly deflected away, swung down as the pair screamed out their resolve.

"Ryaaaa!"

"Seaaaa!"

Even Eugeo, lying on the ground far away, could feel the heat from the shockwave caused by the clashing swords on his skin. Kirito's and Fanatio's black hair violently fluttered, their swords rasped, and the pair switched positions.

Eugeo lost his breath for a moment when Fanatio's bare face finally entered his vision.

It was a pure, beautiful face; one that made him think how a holy woman from the world of fairy-tales would look like if they truly existed. She could be in her mid-twenties at most erring towards the higher side, with her silky skin the shade of black tea with plenty of milk added in. Both her arc-shaped eyebrows and long eyelashes were black, but her eyes were mostly a gold tinged copper-red. Her appearance showed that she was probably born in the eastern region and her nose bridge was moderately high. Her jawline had a tinge of roundedness as well, bringing forth a remarkably gentle elegance. And her petite lips were a very mild red.

The murderous anger from just a little earlier was no longer on the female knight's face. Something like resignation, bottling up a certain sort of sorrow, could be felt in its place.

"—I see now."

Fanatio murmured in her bewitching voice with the swords crossed.

"Criminal, it appears you are a little different from those who picked a fight with me. There haven't been any men able to try and kill me this seriously once they saw this abominable countenance until now."

"Abominable—huh. Then for whose sake are you combing that hair and tingeing those lips red?"

Kirito's question was as provocative as usual, but Fanatio only showed slight signs of a cynical smile, answering quietly.

"I have already waited more than a hundred years for the man I love to request more from me, than sword techniques and severed heads... it is only natural to be in the mood for some cosmetics after aching for him so long under that steel mask and then ending up playing second fiddle to a new female knight, with a face more beautiful than myself and freely flaunting it."

A strong knight more beautiful than even Fanatio. And female too.

It was only after Eugeo shivered upon thinking how such an opponent still remained above in this tower, that he realized he had an idea who the integrity knight fitting those conditions was. Not wearing a helmet, becoming a knight only in recent years, someone who knocked Eugeo down in a single hit at godlike speed—Alice Synthesis Thirty.

Kirito should be pondering over one thing or another at Fanatio's words as well, but he revealed not a single atom of it as he questioned further.

"—What's the most important thing to you? If integrity knights exist purely to serve the highest minister's commands, you wouldn't even require a heart capable of worrying over love or jealousy. I do not know who that man is, but if you've had an unrequited love on him for over a hundred years... that would mean you're human. It's because you're human, just like me. I'm fighting to overthrow the church and highest minister, to enable humans like you to love and live normally!"

Even Eugeo was deeply surprised by those words. He never knew Kirito, who always seemed aloof, thought about such things in his mind. But at the same time, Eugeo also noticed somewhere in his partner's voice there was an echo, as if troubled over some sort of contradiction.

Fanatio's face distorted once again, though only for a fleeting instant.

Looking at a deep valley carved into her smooth forehead, he thought the «piety module» would emerge like in Eldrie's case, but the visible changes to the second among the knights ended there.

"...Child, you do not understand. If the church's authority was lost, who knows what sort of hell this world would be thrust into... The army of the Dark Territory strengthen their forces day after day, clamoring beyond the mountain range at the end that seals them away. Aah... I will admit it, you are strong. And neither underlings of darkness nor malicious intruders, as the Chief Elder mentioned, it seems. However, that does not change the fact that you are of extreme danger. To be able to sway the church and integrity knights with not just that sword, but your words as well... Before the greatest duty granted upon us integrity knights, to protect the Human World and its inhabitants, my love is merely... it's not even worth harvesting, equivalent to the chaff of wheat."

The Heaven Piercing Sword and the black sword crossed between the pair continued emitting a grinding sound that seemed to reach its limit, even while Fanatio talked with a grave expression, as if stating her resolution. It was clear that either of them could be sent flying if they lessened their strength by the slightest amount.

No, the two swords should still be losing their Life in the meantime. If the swords remained locked, the first one to run out of Life would be the Heaven Piercing Sword. After all, if their status as sacred instruments were on the same level, the one with more Life would simply be the thicker and heavier one.

There was no chance Fanatio had not noticed that. And how she would be mercilessly slashed dead by Kirito the moment her sword gets propelled backwards and creates an opening.

"Hence—I need to defeat you. Even if I have to trample upon my pride as a knight. Sneer at me for winning with such an unsightly skill. You possess the right to do so."

After softly declaring all of that, Fanatio continued and shouted.

"Light hidden within the Heaven Piercing Sword, it is now the time to release yourself from your shackles!! —Release recollection!!"

This art ritual—is the art to release its memories!!

The silver blade shone brighter than it ever had.

After that.

Shupaa! Several rays of light were released in a radial pattern from the sword tip with that noise.

Eugeo instinctively thought it was meant to blind. To momentarily rob Kirito's sight and break his posture before cutting him down.

However, that verdict was utterly extinguished when one of the light rays shot by the Heaven Piercing Sword in all directions hit the floor right beside Eugeo, burying deeply into the marble.

It wasn't meant to blind—none of that light was!

Kirito!! Eugeo couldn't bear but to lift his upper body as he screamed in his heart. When he focused his eyes, he saw the light rays fired at point-blank range just about to pierce through Kirito's right arm. That wasn't all, he could already spot evidence of deep black penetration marks in his left shoulder and right thigh.

And Kirito wasn't the only one struck by the ultra-hot light on his body.

The master of the Heaven Piercing Sword, too, had unsightly holes bored through the armor on her abdomen, shoulder, and both legs. The depth of her injuries were worse than Kirito's. Still, that expression filled with resolve that showed on her lovely face didn't stir a single bit.

Integrity Knight Fanatio Synthesis Two planned to blow away her own Life as well, with Kirito as her companion.

The words from the previous highest minister, Cardinal, replayed in his mind. The ritual phrase, «release recollection», awakens all of the weapon's memories, releasing its rampaging power. A power capable of annihilating one's life that swallowed up not only the enemy, but yourself as well.

The released Heaven Piercing Sword gave almost fatal wounds to the pair from point-blank range, with considerable damage to the surrounding four as well, in its initial barrage. The divine ornaments in the grand cloister were not outside its reach either and were brutally torched, while the expensive glass windows shattered in succession. There were hardly any rays of light that flew all the way to Eugeo and the two paralyzed girls, collapsed nearby, but still, they would suffer a direct hit sooner or later.

No matter how much light it emitted, the sacred instrument tempered from a thousand panes of mirrors showed absolutely no sign of falling into silence. The sword point gleamed at intervals of roughly one second, firing short rays of light without taking any care to aim. Half were fired towards the empty skies, scorching only the walls, pillars, and ceiling, but quite a number among the other half reached out at a lower angle and were amassed by the pair's bodies within point-blank range, naturally enough.

Unable to remove his sword, Kirito could only shift his head as much as he could to narrowly avoid the light bent on piercing his forehead. The light went for Fanatio's face next, but the integrity knight didn't make the slightest movement. The light rays grazed her cheeks, burning dark-red grooves into her unblemished, smooth skin and burning away a considerable amount of her abundant black hair in an instant.

"You... damned idiot!!"

Kirito cried out with a desperate expression. Drops of fresh blood scattered from his mouth along with it. Eugeo could easily imagine how taking that many light rays to his body would leave Kirito on the verge of exhausting his Life, regardless of how much he might have. But the black-clothed swordsman stubbornly refused to fall, even sliding his sword over the origin of the light rays, the tip of the Heaven Piercing Sword, covering it with the black sword's flat.

As a result, it might just be a temporary deferment, but all of the light fired towards Kirito and Fanatio ended up being obstructed by the black sword.

Now—now or never!

Kirito didn't signal for it, but Eugeo knew the time had definitely come through both his rationality and intuition.

Fanatio was naturally engaged, while the four knights under her were desperately guarding from the light as well, using their great swords as shields, with hardly any composure to care about the remaining criminal. There was no one capable of stopping Eugeo's full control art that would leave him wide open during its activation if he used it at this moment.

Springing up with an intense force, Eugeo drew out the Blue Rose Sword that he had been gripping onto the entire time in a single stroke.

"Enhance....."

Spinning it in midair, switching it to an underhand grip, he supported the grip with his left hand as well and thrust it into the marble floor with all the strength he could muster.

"—Armament!!"

Close to half of the pale-blue blade sunk deep into the floor.

Bashiiii!! Accompanied by a sharp, explosive noise, the marble floor was instantaneously covered in a pure-white frost.

As crystalline icicles pointedly stabbed upwards, a frigid wave burst forth at a breakneck speed.

Approximately five seconds after activation, the frigid wave with a breadth close to ten mel engulfed Kirito and Fanatio, along with the four knights, at their feet.

It appeared the four knights finally noticed the strange phenomenon with that. The faces covered by their helmets jerked and turned to look at him.

But it was too late.

While Eugeo put all the strength he had into his two hands, he shouted out loud.

"Bloom—Blue Rose Swoord!!"

Countless pale blue icy tendrils grew upwards in an instant, towards the four knights, Fanatio, and Kirito from their feet.

Each tendril was only as thick as a pinky finger. But all of them grew prickly thorns, densely packed together, firmly digging into their prey's legs.

"Nhn..."

"Wh-What!?"

The knights collectively cried out. Innumerous icy tendrils had already crept up to their waists and abdomens along their legs. There were some who belatedly attempted to prune away the tendrils with their great swords, but the tendrils wrapped around the blades repeatedly upon contact, shackling them onto the floor.

The knights assailed by the tendrils, from their chests to their heads, even down to their fingertips, were frozen into ice sculptures incapable of the

slightest movement. Eventually, from the tendrils that obstinately entwined around their quarry while letting out sharp 'kin' noises blossomed a limitless number of large roses, colored in a profound blue and preceded by the reverberation of an exceptionally lucid chime.

Naturally, all of that was cold ice. No honey or fragrance was produced by their solid and transparent petals, but in their place, the roses began emanating a white chill. The air within the entire cloister was shrouded in a thick mist at once, glittering and sparkling. The source of the chill—was the captured knights' Lives.

The speed of reduction was exceedingly gradual, but they could not muster the strength necessary to break their bonds while the ice roses leeched Life from the entirety of their bodies. In the first place, this art ritual wasn't meant for killing enemies. Eugeo decided on the art's nature solely for the goal of retarding Integrity Knight Alice's movement.

The four knights were rendered completely powerless, but as expected of the one who managed them, it appeared Knight Fanatio saw through the skill's nature in the moment the tendrils broke through the frost and jumped into the air in a bid to escape.

However, Kirito, who knew of Eugeo's art, reacted slightly quicker. Having jumped up high in anticipation of Fanatio, Kirito used the swordswoman's spaulder as a stepping stone of all things and escaped further into the air. Somersaulting towards the back while scattering fresh blood, he escaped the ice tendrils.

His sacrifice was driven onto the ground; tendrils wrapping themselves around Fanatio's entire body as she fell onto a knee.

"Kuh...!"

Perhaps due to the break in her concentration, the rays of light indiscriminately fired from the Heaven Piercing Sword ended after shredding several tendrils, sinking into silence. Thin tendrils rapidly twined around the desolated damaged armor, encasing it within thick ice.

The last of the blue roses that opened up from Fanatio's feet bloomed in all its glory atop the scar carved on her cheek. The second integrity knight completely ceased motion along with the sacred instrument.

In spite of the harsh injuries over his whole body, Kirito somersaulted backwards multiple times in succession and broke away from the ice tendrils, then failed on his final landing and fell with a thud beside Eugeo.

"Gufh..."

A choked voice escaped from the depths of his throat and a large quantity of fresh blood immediately sprayed out. Watching as that froze at once into a deep-crimson frost, Eugeo unconsciously cried out.

"Kirito... wait a moment, I'll chant a healing...!"

"No, don't stop the skill!"

Even while he was on the verge of losing consciousness from blood loss, Kirito still scowled with a gleam in his eyes and shook his head.

"That person won't fall from just this much..."

While a thread of blood flowed near his lips, he propped his body full of wounds up with the black sword.

Kirito wiped at his mouth with his left hand and shut his eyelids for a while to regulate his breathing, before his two eyes flared open and he raised the black sword up high.

"System... call!!"

The art ritual following the opening line that strained his willpower was chanted at an astounding speed, considering his physical status.

Wheezes interweaved with blood pervaded the gaps between each verse and florid sprays scattered from his lips at times, but still, Kirito continued to recite the art ritual that exceeded ten lines without getting stuck a single time.

Looking from up close, countless scars were carved into Kirito's body, an image so gory it caused him to shiver. The Heaven Piercing Sword's light had pierced his well-trained body several times, charring his wounds black. There wasn't much bleeding, a small consolation, but the various injuries evidently reached his internal organs. Kirito's Life should be decreasing

quicker than the knights still captured by the ice roses, his life in danger without immediate medical care.

However, Eugeo could not let his hands go from the Blue Rose Sword's grip in order to maintain its full control art. It would provide some relief if Kirito would use a healing art on himself, but it appeared his partner who continued chanting while looking ghastly had absolutely no intention of doing that.

There was no need to be in such a rush, the knights ensnared in the ice cage wouldn't break out so easily—

It was when Eugeo thought this that his sight returned to the knights in front once more.

A streak of white light emerged from the center of the fully bloomed ice roses and stabbed into the wall. Eugeo could only let out a short gasp from the overwhelming shock.

"Eeh..."

The source of the light was Knight Fanatio, who should have been fully enveloped by the layers of ice tendrils and with her movement completely sealed.

The armament full control art didn't exactly allow completely free usage after finishing its chant. Handling the weapon with its offensive ability amplified required a high degree of mental focus from the user. Eugeo, too, had to keep a tight grip on the hilt of the sword pierced into the floor and maintain the image of abundantly blossoming ice roses if he didn't want the knights to escape their shackles.

After fully controlling the Heaven Piercing Sword, Knight Fanatio had shot countless rays of light, gone through an ultra-high speed sword fight with Kirito, and in the end executed its grand technique of an unrestrained and indiscriminate light ray barrage, dealing almost fatal wounds even to herself. Her mental concentration should have been sapped and been released from the state of controlling the Heaven Piercing Sword—or so Eugeo thought.

However.

Completely encased in ice, Fanatio had raised the slender sword up high with her right arm, and was slowly moving it with crackling noises coming

from the ice. The visage of the knight's spirit rising from her slim body, like a swaying heat haze, was clearly reflected in Eugeo's wide opened eyes.

"Kuh...!"

Biting his lips, Eugeo forced more strength into the two hands gripping the handle. Guided by his mental image, close to ten budding ice tendrils reached out towards Fanatio from around her. The tendrils whipped at Fanatio's right arm and twined about it in the same motion, without leaving any gaps, and stopped her movement.

But that only lasted for a brief second.

With virtually no care for the thorns stinging her, the integrity knight forced her right hand down. Nearly half of the blue tendrils snapped, sparkling as their pieces scattered.

A chill colder than ice covered Eugeo from the back.

—Is she truly human?

Kirito's willpower, as he continued his high speed chant while coughing up blood, was absurd as well, but the swordswoman took the cake. She would not fall despite the many perforations over her entire body from the light rays' indiscriminate attacks and the merciless Life absorption by the ice roses—on the contrary, she was continuously pulling apart those ice shackles that rendered her four subordinate knights utterly motionless with the strength of her right arm alone.

Eugeo stared in terror at the Heaven Piercing Sword gripped in the knight's right hand as it seemed to gradually adjust its angle towards the two of them.

Exactly what endowed Fanatio with this much power?

Her obligation to protect the law as an integrity knight? Her love towards some man that she carried for over a hundred years? Or perhaps, those words that came from the woman's mouth earlier...?

Fanatio said that the Human World would likely be overrun by the Dark Territory's armies if it lost the might of the Axiom Church.

Thus, that meant that even if she was hurt in the process, that woman was willing to fight to protect the masses of the Human World—those who should have been looked down upon, held in contempt, and taken

advantage of by existences like her, whether they were higher class nobles or livestock.

However, that was impossible. Integrity knights were minions under that highest minister, Administrator, who arrested the young Alice and transformed her into a different individual by robbing her memories. A detestable enemy. Eugeo's mind had established them thusly, and he climbed the cathedral, determined to take their lives should the need arise.

Despite that, how could he even consider this true—how could he seriously consider this integrity knight as an agent of justice?

"You... the whole lot of you don't deserve to uphold justice!!"

Eugeo gave a stifled scream and poured all of the hostility he could scrape together from the depths of his heart into the Blue Rose Sword.

Once again, numerous ice tendrils leapt out around Fanatio, their tips turning into sharp thorns and piercing into the knight's right arm one after another.

"Stop... stop moving!!"

Despite how overwhelming hatred should be whirling within his heart, for some reason, something spilled out from Eugeo's eyes. However, he could never concede those were tears. Eugeo couldn't let his heart be moved by Fanatio's figure as her right arm stupidly refused to stop even while pierced by the ice thorns, embodiments of Eugeo's outrage and resentment.

The integrity knight's arm was battered. Snapped thorns were stuck in it like a pincushion, her blood quickly trickling down and turning into dangling red icicles.

But in the end, the arm's movement did not stop, and it adjusted the Heaven Piercing Sword held aloft from vertical to horizontal, training its sharp point onto Eugeo and Kirito.

Eugeo saw the silver blade bathed in a radiance, more dazzling than ever before, through the tears that blurred his sight.

It shone so brightly that he could only believe Fanatio was spending the rest of her remaining Life on it. Eugeo's moist, squinted eyes gazed upon the pure-white radiance that felt like the Sun Goddess Solus had descended into this grand cloister.

—I can't win. I can't win against her as I currently am.

Gazing at the ice roses that crudely crumbled simply by being exposed to the white light, Eugeo gently took a breath.

He, however, had no plans to gallantly close his eyes and wait for the light to take his life. He absolutely couldn't accept yielding to Fanatio's «justice» in such a manner.

At the very least, he wished to display his obstinacy by having one last rose blossom. It was when he tried to scrape together the dregs of hatred still remaining in the depths of his heart, determinedly, that it happened.

Kirito softly muttered by his side, apparently having finished chanting the art ritual.

"You can't beat her with hatred, Eugeo."

"Eh..."

Upon turning his head, his partner continued with a slight smile visible on his bloodstained lips.

"You didn't get this far because you hated integrity knights, right? You wanted to take Alice back, you wanted to meet her again... you're here because you love Alice, right? That feeling definitely won't lose to her justice. I'm the same... I want to protect the people in this world; I want to protect you and Alice and even her over there. So there's no way we can lose to her now... isn't that right, Eugeo?"

Kirito's voice was calm despite the desperate situation. The black-clothed swordsman with many mysteries surrounding him nodded once more with a smile and looked forward.

That was the exact moment the Heaven Piercing Sword fired what was likely its final and greatest beam of light.

It was a gigantic spear of light, large enough to fit all of the light rays it had fired so far within it and more. It was like the Holy Spiritual Light, personally thrown by the goddess, Solus, to drive away the Darkness God Vector during the world's creation, had descended to incinerate all that exists.

Kirito's black eyes flared wide open and were gleaming with overwhelming resolve. His voice that recited the final verse was filled with an unwavering determination befitting the dire circumstances.

"Enhance armament!!"

Facing straight ahead, the blade of the black sword pulsed.

Immediately after, strands of darkness flowed out from all over the blade.

The pitch-black torrent that seemed to suck in all light rippled, twisted, and entangled around itself. They became a spear, thick enough to wrap one's arms around, in an instant and increasingly pushed forward.

Upon straining his eyes, it seemed only the sharpened tip was solidly materialized, taking on an obsidian-like gleam. He could recall that texture. The gigantic tree Eugeo swung an axe at, day after day. The «demonic tree» from which that black sword originated—the Gigas Cedar.

The moment he recognized it, Eugeo understood the true form behind the full control art Kirito activated.

He had awoken the memories sleeping within the black sword through the art ritual and projected into this location the appearance it could once boast of, that of the gigantic tree that refused to be hacked down over hundreds of years. Of course, its shape and size had not remained the same as it was then, but its essence was exactly the same.

Tough, sharp, and an overwhelming mass.

Its very existence was worthy of becoming an ultimate weapon.

Eugeo's heart pounded hard. Immediately—

The huge, pitch-black spear's tip made contact with the huge spear that was the gathered light of Solus. The explosive shockwave intensely shook the entire grand cloister... possibly the entire Central Cathedral itself.

Perhaps even the giant tree was oppressed by the heat and intensity of the light that went beyond imagination, for it lost its momentum in charging forward. But endless darkness continued to stream from the black sword in Kirito's hands, trying to spur the spear forward, even to the bitter end.

It appeared the Heaven Piercing Sword, held in Fanatio's hand, had no intention of resigning either. The rampaging torrent of light strengthened with each second, the ice roses covering the knight had already completely melted away due to its heat. That might have been an understatement; the gauntlet covering the knight's right arm appeared to be glowing bright red with white smoke rising from it.

The clash between light and darkness continued for a while in the center of the grand cloister.

However, it was doubtful a competition between powers of such extreme levels would end with them perfectly offsetting each other and vanishing. It was certain that one side would drive back the other and thoroughly annihilate its enemy.

The one at a disadvantage in this match—was Kirito?

Sure, the Gigas Cedar was tough, but in the end, it was still a tree, a tangible existence. As the original had eventually been chopped down after hacking at it time after time, this, too, would be extinguished after getting damaged beyond its limits.

However, the Heaven Piercing Sword's light was a mass of pure heat. How exactly could an intangible assault be snuffed out?

Supposing countermeasures exist, it would be either to use a mirror to deflect it like Kirito had once succeeded with, or neutralizing it with an absolute frost, stronger than what the Blue Rose Sword had brought forth; a power with a special trait capable of opposing it should be necessary. However, listing through the Gigas Cedar's properties would result in two: its absurd toughness and its weight—

No, there was one more.

Greedily absorbing Solus's light and turning it into its own energy.

Fanatio's spear of light was abruptly ripped into over a thousand streams.

The balance broken, the one to charge forth once again was the essence of Kirito's giant tree in the color of darkness.

The tip was red-hot to the point of being blinding, but still, it gouged and shredded through the light without yielding to its pressure, proceeding towards the source.

The light, split out in a radial pattern, pierced everywhere in the grand cloister, causing countless small explosions as they melted the ice tendrils. The four knights stuck onto the floor were blasted into the air one after another.

Even as Integrity Knight Fanatio looked upon the huge, pitch-black spear drawing close like a tempest, she didn't take a single step. It appeared that all the anger and hatred had already become absent from her beautiful face. Her eyelids gently closed and her mouth moved slightly. Some sort of emotion must have been the root of that, but Eugeo had no guess for what it was.

The giant tree's thorny tip finally ground its way to the light's origin and collided with the Heaven Piercing Sword's sharp point.

First, the slender sword of white silver contorted as it was flicked away, glittering as it spun in the air.

Immediately following that, the knight herself was thrown into the air by a tremendous impact.

Fragments of the purple armor scattered as she was swept straight into the ceiling, smashing the wall mural that took the world's creation as its theme into small pieces.

Her descent was slow. Along with countless marble fragments, Fanatio's body fell as though there were strings attached to it, falling directly in front of the large doors at the rear of the grand cloister with a dull crash. And the second integrity knight stood no more.

The pitch-black spear gently lost its corporeality and began to be absorbed back into the black sword Kirito held, like a stream of shadows. When Eugeo took a look, it appeared the sword itself had become somewhat enlarged like during that one battle with Raios, but it returned to its original size once all of the darkness was once again within the sword.

Eugeo turned back forward and gazed mutely over the debris left from the fierce battle.

The spotless marble floor and walls were melted and broken here and there, mere shadows of their former selves. The floor at the heart of the brawl between the huge spears of darkness and light in particular, had a broad and deep trench channeled through it; it was weird how it hadn't broken through to the floor below.

The fact that two people alone brought about this much destruction to the Central Cathedral's fiftieth floor, the «Grand Cloister of Spiritual Light», not to mention that they were just swordsmen studying at the Sword Mastery Academy only two mere days ago, would not be believed by anyone aside from those present.

—But we really did it.

Eugeo muttered in his inner thought. We've fought five of the integrity knights, those who maintained an unconditional rule over this world of humans since its creation, and we have won.

Counting from Eldrie onwards, this would make it nine integrity knights we've driven off. According to Cardinal's words, there are twelve knights stationed within the cathedral, so there's three left. In other words, if we defeat just a few more knights...

It was roughly at the same time as Eugeo clenched his teeth.

Kirito collapsed onto his knees beside him. The black sword fell from his right hand with a flat clang.

Tearing his hands from the Blue Rose Sword stabbed into the floor in a panic, Eugeo's torso lurched forward and he propped his partner up.

"Kirito!"

The body he held back was astonishingly light and the extent of the blood and Life flowing out was undeniable. The skin was whiter than marble and there was no sign of those shut eyelids lifting. Scanning his eyes over the entire body, he held his hand over the wound that seemed the deepest, the one at the flank.

"System Call! Generate luminous element!"

Gathering the three generated luminous elements on the wound, he next converted them into healing power through an art ritual. He released his hand just as the charred wound began to close, bit by bit, and carried out the same treatment on the wound at the left shoulder. Normally, catalysts such as «sacred flower orbs» were necessary for generating luminous elements which consumed much sacred power from the surrounding area, but they weren't now. Sufficient Life extracted from the five knights by the Blue Rose Sword had transformed into sacred power and had accumulated in the air.

The continuous reduction of Life should halted with the worst wound healed, but Eugeo couldn't use any luminous-type sacred arts capable of recovering Life of someone who lost much of theirs. He grasped Kirito's right hand with his left without any hesitation and chanted a new art ritual.

"System call! Transfer human unit durability, self to left!!"

Beads of indistinct blue light covered Eugeo's entire body this time around and they immediately gathered at his left hand, then streamed into Kirito's body. This art which allowed for Life transfer between humans had a huge effect despite the art ritual's simplicity.

Thinking back upon it, Kirito was the one who had suffered heavy injuries while Eugeo had barely lost any Life, both during the battle against Deusolbert and this time as well. He couldn't possibly pay it all back unless he handed over his Life to the brink of collapsing.

Or so Eugeo thought, but when he felt roughly half of his Life had finally flowed out, Kirito fuzzily opened his eyes and gripped Eugeo's hand with his left, pulling it away from himself.

"...Thanks, Eugeo, I'm alright now."

"Don't force yourself, there should be some injuries hidden from plain sight left over after you went through all that."

"It's way better than that time those goblins came at us; I'm more worried about that person..."

Finding the Knight Fanatio, fallen on the opposite side of the cloister, at the end of where those black eyes stared, Eugeo unconsciously bit his lips.

"...Kirito... That woman... tried to kill you..."

The moment he said that, what Kirito had said immediately before he activated his full control art resounded deep within his ears. Looking downwards, he continued in a whisper.

"Can't beat her with hatred... that was what you said earlier, wasn't it? Yes, that might have been true. I wasn't fighting that integrity knight due to some personal grudge or hatred directed at her, that certainly wasn't my reasoning for fighting... But... But I really can't find it within myself to forgive the integrity knights. It's not just their ridiculous strength, if they had that resolve... if they possessed the heart to protect everyone living in the Human World, then why can't they use that power and..."

Eugeo faltered, unable to speak any further. However, Kirito, who staggered up and picked his black sword from the floor, nodded as though he understood.

"I'm pretty sure those guys are stuck with their own doubts. If we meet with that Knight Commander person, we might find out more about that... Eugeo, your full control art was amazing. You're the one who beat those knights. So there's no need for you to aim your hatred at those humans, Fanatio and those knights in the «Four Oscillation Blades», any longer..."

"Humans... Yeah... you're right. I understood that much when I fought them. She's human; that's why she was so strong."

When Eugeo muttered that, Kirito let out a slight laugh and agreed.

"Those guys might say that they're truly the good guys, and they might truly be the bad guys in your eyes, but they're living humans just like us. Deciding who's truly good or bad like that is impossible for humans, I'm sure."

Those words sounded like he was voicing them so that he could also believe in them; a thought suddenly came to Eugeo.

—Kirito. Don't you think that would apply to the one whom you got so angry over earlier as well, the highest minister, Administrator... the one with an ironclad rule over the Axiom Church and consequently, the world?

But before he could ask, Kirito had already started to walk towards Fanatio who lay fallen before the grand doors.

He took five, six steps before pivoting back and retrieving a small bottle after searching in his pocket.

"Oops, forgot about this. Get rid of the kids' poison with this, please. Be sure to break those venomous swords and check if they're holding onto anything else strange before you make them drink it."

Thinking about how he had forgotten about them as well, Eugeo caught the small bottle Kirito tossed and nodded.

After standing up, pulling the Blue Rose Sword from the floor, and turning around, the young female knights, Fizel and Linel, were in the same condition, lying on the floor, paralyzed. The frost covering the surroundings had already vanished and it didn't seem they had suffered any injuries from the ice tendrils or light rays.

The moment their eyes met with Eugeo approaching them, the girls sulked by averting their eyeballs which were all that were mobile.

Looks like we won't be seeing eye-to-eye in a different sense from Fanatio's case here; he held back a sigh as he crouched down and pulled out the two venomous swords, thrust into the floor by the tip of their noses, with both hands. Tossing them both into the air, he swung the Blue Rose Sword a single time as they came spinning down.

The short swords were demolished without difficulty, turning into specks of light and vanishing as they lost all Life before they fell onto the floor. Sheathing his beloved sword, he squatted down beside the pair and checked over their ascetic clothes to see if they possessed any other weapons while apologizing with a "sorry".

Lastly, he uncorked the small bottle and poured the seventy percent left of its content into both of their mouths, sparing half to each of them. With this, the pair should be able to recover from their paralysis in a little less than ten minutes like Eugeo.

It would be fine leaving them alone like this, but Eugeo then thought, "What would Kirito say in a situation like this?", and thus, opened his mouth after thinking for a short bit.

"...Fanatio and Kirito are that strong because they have their sacred instruments and armament full control arts... that might be what the two of you think, being who you are, but that's wrong. Those two are much, much stronger... they could fight on even when hurt that badly not through their skills or weapons, but through their heart and mind; that's also why they can use such amazing art rituals. True, the two of you may be experienced with techniques for murdering humans. But killing and winning are completely different matters. I didn't notice that until today as well, though..."

Eugeo had absolutely no idea how much of his own words reached them as they kept their eyes averted as usual. In the first place, he wasn't very good at dealing with children.

But still, at the very least, the pair should have felt something after watching that battle as well, he was sure of that. When he recalled that innocent idle chatter from Fizel and Linel, he felt that he could believe them to not be truly bad as well. Turning around after a simple "see you", Eugeo ran after Kirito.

He quickly ran his eyes left and right as he moved through the extraordinarily devastated cloister, checking on the status of the four knights serving under Fanatio.

It appeared all of them had suffered rather deep wounds from the spear of light that went berserk as they had all collapsed. But as expected of integrity knights, he couldn't spot any completely devoid of Life. Their bleeding was minor as well, so they would likely be able to move soon enough.

However, unlike them who were only dragged into the small explosions, Fanatio had received the entirety of the huge, rushing spear of darkness and was clearly on the verge of losing her life, even without looking at all that blood spilled in a large area around the fallen woman.

Coming to a standstill near Kirito who knelt on a knee by the knight's side, Eugeo silenced his breath as he peeked in over his partner's shoulders.

Looking at them up close, the wounds all over Fanatio's body were so horrifying, he wanted to turn his eyes away. Her torso and legs had holes pierced by heat rays in four spots, while her right arm was torn by the ice roses' thorns and on top of that, scorched by the aftermath of the Heaven Piercing Sword's final attack, leaving practically no place unhurt.

However, as expected, what appeared to be the most terrible was the wound on her upper abdomen that had suffered a direct hit from the Gigas Cedar. There was a gaping cavity, as deep and large as an adult-sized fist, with fresh blood flowing incessantly. The face with her eyelids shut had changed into a faint bluish-purple, like her armor's color had made its way there, and not even a trace of vitality could be spotted.

Kirito was in the process of trying out sacred arts to mend the wound as he held his hands over Fanatio's abdomen. The Stacia Window likely wasn't open because looking at her Life served no purpose at the moment. Noticing Eugeo approaching, he kept his face down and spoke with urgency in his tone.

"Help me out here, the blood won't stop."

"Ah... yeah."

Nodding and getting down on his knees opposite, he put his hands to the same wound. After he chanted the same luminous-type healing art as the one he had used on Kirito earlier, the blood flowing from the wound

seemed to have reduced somewhat, but the goal of sealing it was still far off.

It was evident the surrounding sacred power would soon be exhausted and the both of them would be unable to generate luminous elements even if they persisted in the healing. Fanatio would probably recover some Life temporarily if they transferred theirs, but that was useless in the end if the blood loss wasn't stemmed. As it was, saving the woman's life would require assistance from a sacred art user capable of stronger healing arts than the pair, or a legendary elixir.

Firmly biting his lips as he quietly stared at Kirito's face, Eugeo spoke after a moment of hesitation.

"It's impossible, Kirito. She's losing too much blood."

Kirito kept his eyes cast down for a while, but soon answered in a hoarse voice.

"I know... but if I don't give up on thinking, there... there should be some kind of way to get through this. Eugeo, I'm begging you, please think about it too."

That expression was filled with a sense of powerlessness, much like when he was unable to prevent that malicious act on their valet trainees, Ronye and Tiezé, two days ago; Eugeo felt a prickling sensation in his chest.

However, no matter how much he thought, it was still obvious that there was no method to call back the life now fading away before his very eyes. The thought of healing the four knights fallen behind and having them help with the treatment flashed through his mind, but they definitely didn't have the time to afford carrying out such an oblique method. Fanatio's Life would likely be lost for all eternity in the seconds after either Kirito or Eugeo stopped their healing arts. And even if they continued with them—the same conclusion would arrive several minutes later.

Eugeo made up his mind and informed his partner in the most solemn voice he could muster.

"Kirito. —You told me this when we escaped from the underground jail, didn't you? That I would need to be prepared to cut down any enemy if I were to go any further. Weren't you fighting this person on the basis of that resolve earlier? Didn't you use that skill determined to have one of you die with the other living on? At the very least, this person... Fanatio-san did not

hesitate. Her expression showed that she put her entire life on the line... that's what I believe. You should understand that too, Kirito... it wasn't at a stage where you could win while worrying about your enemies or going easy on them."

That was what turning not a wooden sword, but a real sword towards an opponent meant in the end. Eugeo had learnt that through his trembling hands, the sharp pain in his right eye, and the icy terror deep in his chest when he sliced off Humbert's arm.

That said, he had always believed this black-haired partner of his had understood that long ago—from before they met in the forest south of Rulid.

Upon hearing Eugeo's voice, Kirito gnashed his teeth together and endlessly shook his head left and right.

"I understand... I have to understand. Both this person and I fought seriously... a close, earnest fight where either of us could have won. But... this person will disappear if she dies! She has lived over a hundred years... in hesitation, in love, in pain; I can't just let a soul like that vanish... I mean... even if I die..."

Even if he dies—what was he trying to imply? All humans will have their souls brought before the goddess of life, Stacia, when they exhaust their Life, and vanish from the Human World. As long as Kirito, despite his many mysteries, was a human, that should apply to him as well.

Eugeo momentarily became bewildered, but that was erased as Kirito looked straight up and yelled without warning.

"Can you hear me?! Knight Commander! Your deputy's going to die here! Or that elder person's fine too! If you can hear me, come down here and help!!"

His scream echoed softly from the high ceiling far above and vanished in vain. However, Kirito did not give up and continued shouting.

"Anyone's fine... there's still some of you integrity knights around, aren't there?! Come and help your ally! I don't care whether you're a minister or an ascetic... just get your butt over here!!"

There was no response from above, but silence from the likenesses of the three goddesses, broken beyond recognition. Not even a gentle breeze descended upon them, let alone the presence of another being.

When they looked back down, the hue of Fanatio's hair and skin were becoming unmistakably more pallid. Her remaining Life was a hundred, or perhaps fifty—Eugeo, who wanted to send off the deputy leader of the integrity knights, Fanatio Synthesis Two, departing for the Celestial World with at least a silent prayer, tried to persuade Kirito otherwise, but he did not cease his screams.

"I'm begging you... someone! Help us out if you're watching! ...That's right, come here, Cardinal! Cardinal..."

Kirito sank into silence as though something had blocked his throat all of a sudden.

Eugeo looked up and watched his partner's face in shock, as it first showed a surprised expression, then a moment of hesitation before it turned into determination.

"H-Hey... what is it all of a sudden?"

However, Kirito thrust his right hand into his coat breast without replying.

What he took out—swaying on the end of a slender chain, was a small steel dagger.

"Kirito—! That's-!!"

Eugeo instinctively shouted.

The same dagger dangled around Eugeo's neck. He couldn't possibly have forgotten about it; it was the dagger that Cardinal, the previous highest minister before she was banished, had given them before they left the Great Library Room. It possessed absolutely no offensive ability, but it connected the one stabbed by it temporarily to Cardinal's domain. She had handed them over, with Eugeo's meant for Alice and Kirito's meant for Administrator, to function as a trump card for the duo.

"You can't, Kirito! Cardinal said she didn't have any more prepared... that's supposed to be for the battle against Administrator..."

"I know..."

Kirito groaned in a pained voice.

"But I can help her if I use this... not helping someone out even when I have the means to do so... I just can't prioritize anything to be higher than a human's life."

He gazed intently at the dagger with a expression, pained, yet filled with a resolute determination—

Kirito stabbed what he was holding in his right hand into Fanatio's left hand, the only part of her body that wasn't injured, without any trace of hesitation.

In that instant, the entire dagger radiated a dazzling light along with its chain.

Without even the time to swallow his breath, the dagger disassembled into several bands of purple light. Upon study, all of the light bands were lines of sacred letters just like those that appeared in the Stacia Window. The intricate letters separated from each other as they glided into the air and sank in everywhere over Fanatio's body.

The entire integrity knight was enveloped in a purple aura along with the complete disintegration of the dagger. Eugeo gawked at the amazing spectacle, then noticed the bleeding from the wound on her upper abdomen had completely ceased, somewhat belatedly.

"Kirito—"

Eugeo tried to tell him that the bleeding had stopped, but was interrupted by a resounding voice that immediately came out of nowhere.

[Goodness me, what a helpless fellow you are.]

Kirito snapped his face up as though it were repelled.

"Cardinal... is that you?!"

[There's no time, don't ask the obvious.]

There was no doubt that the lovely voice and impudent obtuse manner belonged to the previous highest minister they had encountered in the Great Library Room.

"Cardinal... sorry, I..."

Cardinal bluntly cut off Kirito's anguished voice as he tried to talk.

[There's no point apologizing now. ...I figured it might end up this way since I saw how you fought. I understand your circumstances; I will handle the treatment for Fanatio Synthesis Two. However, I will be taking her body over here as it will take time for her to recover completely.]

The purple light wrapping around Fanatio's figure shone brightly as the voice mentioned so. Eugeo involuntarily closed his eyes and by the time he opened them again, the integrity knight was already—surprisingly enough, this included the pool of blood spread over the floor—nowhere to be seen.

Several of the fragmented sacred letters could still be seen drifting through the air. Cardinal's voice was channelled through them as their flickering overlapped, the volume gradually falling.

[Those bugs have already noticed, so I'll make this brief. Judging from the situation, the possibility of Administrator still being in her unawakened state is high at the present moment. If you reach the highest floor before that woman awakens, you could deal with her without using the dagger. Hurry... there aren't many integrity knights left...]

Eugeo felt the invisible conduit that linked to the Great Library Room's domain was rapidly closing. Cardinal's voice proceeded into the distance and just before her presence disappeared, the specks of light in the air flickered and fell onto the floor as they took corporeal form.

What tumbled atop the marble with a refreshing note were two small glass bottles.

Kirito stared at the bottles the shade of lapis lazuli as though his energy had been sapped, but soon reached his arm out to pick both up at the same time. Looking up, he held one between his fingertips and offered it.

While dropping the bottle into Eugeo's outstretched palm, Kirito murmured in a low tone.

"...Sorry for that mess, Eugeo."

"Nah... you haven't done anything worth apologizing for. It just surprised me a little."

When he said so with a wan smile, Kirito finally showed a small one as well. Standing up while wobbling slightly, he flicked off the small bottle's cork.

"Seeing as she's going to the bother of sending us refreshments, let's accept it with thanks."

Standing after his partner, Eugeo pulled the cork off the small bottle and drank down the fluid it contained in a single gulp. He couldn't quite call it delicious even if he were to try being polite; he grimaced at its sourness that resembled siral water devoid of sugar, but it felt refreshing like cold water pouring upon his consciousness, exhausted from the lengthy battle. It seemed that their half-depleted Lives were recovering rapidly as well, with the remaining wounds on Kirito's limbs mending in the blink of an eye.

"Amazing... it would have been great if she had sent a whole bunch of these, rather than just these two while she was at it."

When Eugeo said so without thinking, Kirito shrugged his shoulders with a cynical smile.

"If they have a priority as high as this, it would probably take a long time to convert them into da... art rituals and transfer them. Instead, you should be looking at how fast she... uwah!?"

All of a sudden, Kirito let out an agitated voice and sprung aside, so Eugeo stared at his partner in puzzlement.

"Wh-What is it, all of a sudden?"

"Eu-Eugeo... don't move, no, don't look down."

"Hah?"

It would be harder to not look down when told such a thing. Instinctively looking down at his own feet, Eugeo found that something had got there without his notice and screamed.

"Eek!?"

Its length was roughly fifteen cen. Countless slender legs stuck out from its long and flat torso, split into minuscule segments, and its front half was atop Eugeo's shoe. The ball-shaped tip that was apparently its head possessed a row of over ten small, red eyes and two terrifyingly long, needlelike horns protruded from its two sides, slowly swaying

independently of each other. It was a sort of insect—that might have been it, but its weird appearance could only have been described as repulsive. Insects are abundant in the forest south of Rulid, but he had never seen one with such an appearance before.

Eugeo froze as his mind overloaded, but the weird insect searched its surroundings with its horns for another three seconds before it decided to try and gently creep up his trousers from his shoe, so he sprung up with yet another scream.

"Eek...!!"

When he violently stamped down, the insect fell off onto its back, but it immediately spun about and rapidly crept between his legs. Unable to stand it climbing up again, Eugeo jumped up and down over and over again, but a particular disaster occurred upon landing after jumping numerous times.

Following a harsh 'kusha' noise, the sensation of a lumpy and sticky object splattering open made itself known to Eugeo's sole while the bug was magnificently pulverized under his right shoe.

Brilliant orange bodily fluid squirted in all directions and a pungent, offensive stench hung in the air. Eugeo got close to losing consciousness as he saw the torn-off leg still hopping about, but he desperately held down his fear, aware that this was no situation to faint, and looked up at Kirito in a bid for assistance.

When he did so, the partner with whom he was connected heart-to-heart was apparently now three mel away and slowly backing off even further.

"Hey... heey! Don't you dare run away!"

Against that shrill accusation, Kirito shook his head that had turned blue left and right in small movements.

"Sorry, I can't really handle stuff like that."

"I can't handle them either! At all!"

"Hey, don't bugs like that usually draw in another ten or so when one dies?"

"Don't even speak of such things!!"

Determined to share his fate with his partner even if he had to embrace him, Eugeo crouched in preparation to hurl himself at him, but he froze again upon a purple light abruptly shining from under his feet.

The disgusting remains were just dispersing into beads of light when he timidly looked down. The viscous fluid, husk, and such vanished without a trace before seconds had even passed and Eugeo let out a long sigh of relief from deep inside.

Apparently assured from far away that it had vanished, Kirito finally came back after the whole affair had already been settled and spoke out in a solemn tone.

"...So that's it. That just now was a familiar released by Administrator to search for Cardinal. So it sniffed out the passage to the library room..."

"....."

Eugeo scowled at Kirito with upturned eyes, showing a slight resentment, then reluctantly replied that he understood.

"Then... that means there's a whole bunch of these creatures prowling around this tower? But we haven't seen a single one until now."

"Look, when we escaped into the library room from the rose garden, there was that rustling noise from behind the door, right? They're normally hidden away well, but that said, there's no meaning in going around to look for them. Besides... Cardinal mentioned something strange, didn't she... that Administrator was unawakened, or something like that..."

"Aah, now that you bring it up... That essentially meant that she's sleeping? She has already gone to bed despite the sun still out?"

Kirito rubbed his chin for a while at Eugeo's question and then answered as though he didn't understand either.

"Cardinal also said that Administrator and the integrity knights are overexerting themselves in various ways in exchange for living for hundreds of years. Especially Administrator who seems to spend most of each day sleeping, but... in that case, what exactly happens to her control over the integrity knights and the bugs like the one just now...?"

Sunk into thought for several more seconds with his head looking down, he soon responded to himself while mussing his forelocks about.

"Well, we'll naturally find out if we continue to climbing. —Putting that aside, Eugeo, could you please take a look at my back?"

"H-Hah?"

Kirito spun to show his back to Eugeo who looked on in mute confusion. He ran his eyes over it while at a loss, but there wasn't really anything strange about the black fabric of his coat aside from the damage to it, proportionate to the recurring battles.

"There's... nothing special about it, though..."

"How do I describe this... are there any small bugs clinging on? Like a spider or something like that."

"Nope, there's nothing like that, though."

"I see, that's fine, then. —Well then, once again, let's continue on, to the second half of our journey!"

Eugeo chased after Kirito, who began to walk briskly towards the cloister's northern end after that, in a fluster.

"Hey, what was that just now?!"

"It's nothing, really."

"You're making me curious, take a look at my back too!"

"Like I said, it's really nothing."

During their light conversation, an occurrence which had repeated countless times since they had left Rulid Village, Eugeo softly murmured within his heart what he truly wished to ask.

Why were you, capable of keeping your cool in any situation, so distraught before the death of Fanatio, an enemy—and what was to follow those words, [even if I die]—

Kirito, just who... are you...?

The black-clothed swordsman who stood still before the humongous doors, possibly several times his height, reached out with both his hands and pushed them open to the sides with vigour. In that instant, a chilly gale blew through and Eugeo turned his face away slightly.

Part 3

What lay beyond the grand doors was a chamber roughly as spacious as the stairwell on the southern side of the large corriders through which Eugeo and Kirito had ascended. It was rectangular in shape as well, with the deep blue northern sky visible through the long and narrow windows lined up along the opposing wall.

However, an essential element couldn't be seen on the floor set with chequered black and white tiles—the grand staircase that should lead towards the fifty-first floor.

No matter how many times they scanned the spacious chamber, no ladders, or even a single strand of rope could be found. There was only a single strange, circular cavity in the middle of the sleek and smooth floor, and not a single path meant to proceed upwards entered Eugeo's vision.

"Th... There are no stairs."

Muttering in surprise as he stepped into the dim hall behind Kirito, Eugeo felt a stream of cold air on his neck and hunched his shoulders. It seemed his partner noticed it as well, as the pair concurrently looked straight up.

"...Wha..."

"What the heck..."

And the pair jointly became speechless.

There was no ceiling. A space, no, shaft the same shape as the chamber extended beyond what their sight could perceive. They couldn't even estimate how much higher it continued, sunk in a cerulean darkness.

After they returned their eyes from the distant height, they realized this chasm might not be an entirely vacant space. Doors, smaller than the one behind the pair, were embedded in the surface of the wall at the corresponding heights for each level from the fifty-first floor onwards, each with an elongated terrace extending close to the middle of the chasm.

In other words, they could break into the floors above if they could reach those terraces—that certainly was the case.

Eugeo extended his right hand and casually tried to jump up without thinking.

"...No way that would have reached..."

He murmured with a sigh. Even the closest terrace was, naturally enough, set higher than the ceiling in the «Grand Cloister of Spiritual Light» behind them and thus, over twenty mel even through liberal estimations.

Kirito, who looked up in the same manner at the side, asked in a feeble voice.

"Look... I'm just confirming here, but there aren't any sacred arts to fly, right?"

"Nope."

A merciless, instantaneous reply.

"I mean, flying in the air's a privilege reserved solely for integrity knights, isn't it? And those guys don't even fly through arts; they ride their flying dragons..."

"So... how exactly do the humans here go back and forth between the fifty-first floor and onwards?"

"Who knows..."

The pair tilted their heads in sync. It would be preferable to avoid it, but there might be no other way but to return to the grand cloister and ask for the method to head up from the collapsed underlings of Fanatio—it happened the moment they were thinking that.

"Hey, something's coming."

Kirito whispered in a nervous voice.

"Eh?"

He looked up at the chasm again as instructed.

He certainly saw something approaching. As though brushing past the ends of the protruding terraces that appeared as lines, a black shadow was gently descending towards them.

As he leapt away to the back with Kirito and positioned his hand on his sword grip, Eugeo firmly stared at the approaching shadow.

It was in the shape of a perfect circle. Perhaps with a diameter of two mel or so? It seemed like a metallic disk with how its edge could be seen glinting eerily each time it caught the blue light shining in from the slender windows. However, why could such a thing gracefully descend in a space without supports or anything of that sort?

Eugeo's ears discerned a queer noise going, "whoosh", when the disk passed by the terrace two floors above at a constant speed. His neck noticed a cold breeze each time.

Eugeo neither ran, nor drew his sword; he simply stood still, dumbfounded, and gazed at how the disk grazed the terrace overhead and descended before the pair. When the hovering disk closed in until only a mel away, a small hole opened at the center of its underside and he noticed the air blasting out from there was the cause of the mysterious noise and wind.

However, how could a metal disk float with merely wind power—he questioned as the whooshing noise steadily grew and the metallic disk's rate of descent rapidly fell, finally coming to a stop as it neatly wedged into the circular cavity, bored into the stone floor, with only a bump and a slight quiver.

The top surface of the disk was polished smooth like a mirror. Detailed craftsmanship went into the silver handrails installed on the circular edge. A glass pipe measuring roughly one mel in length and fifty cen in thickness stood straight up in the center—a single young girl silently stood there with both her two hands on the top of the pipe, rounded in a dome shape.

"......!?"

Eugeo retreated another step as he put strength into his right hand supported by his sword's grip. He heightened his guard, thinking this might be a new integrity knight.

But he immediately noticed the girl wasn't equipped with even a single dagger on her waist or back. Her garment, a plain, black long skirt, appeared ill-fitting for combat as well. The only embellishment to speak of was the modest, see-through hem knitted onto the white apron that hung from her chest to below her knees, which meant she worn no other accessories on herself.

Her light brown hair, slightly grayed, was cut straight at her eyebrows and shoulders, with hardly any distinguishing features on her pale facial complexion. It was well-ordered but without even a shred of emotion.

Eugeo felt her approximate age was a little younger, but he didn't have any confidence that it truly was.

Who exactly is this girl; Eugeo tried to look at the girl's eyes, but he couldn't even discern their color as they were hidden by her lowered eyelashes. The girl, who made no attempt at all to look at the pair's faces even after the disk stopped, took her hands off the strange glass pipe and placed them together at the front of her apron, then bowed her head further and let out her voice for the first time.

"Thank you for your patience. Which floor are you heading for, dear sirs?"

A voice that possessed the minimum level of vocal intonation and revealed no sort of emotion at all. Eugeo didn't hear even a fragment of anything resembling animosity, so he gently took his hand off his sword. The girl's words repeated once more in his mind.

"Which floor... wait... Then, you're willing to bring us to the floors above?"

When he asked half in belief, half in doubt, the girl brought down her head that had returned to its original position once again.

"Certainly. May I know your desired floor?"

"Well... even if you say that..."

Having thought that everyone who would appear before them in the cathedral would be an enemy, Eugeo faltered, not knowing what to say immediately. Kirito, standing at his side, then spoke in a carefree tone; Eugeo didn't know what exactly was going on in that head either.

"Erm, we're the wanted ones who invaded the cathedral... wouldn't there be a problem with us riding on that ele, no, disk?"

The girl then slightly tilted her head, but instantly returned it to its original position and answered.

"My sole task is the operation of this elevating disk. I have not received orders on anything else that doesn't pertain to that."

"I see. Then allow me to take you up on your offer."

Kirito began briskly walking in the direction of the disk while speaking those easygoing words, so Eugeo called out in a panicked voice.

"H-Hey, you sure it's fine?"

"Well, it doesn't look like there's anything other way to get up."

"That's... true, but still..."

Eugeo was amazed how he could ride such a strange object with barely any caution immediately after going through all of that with the two adolescent integrity knights, but it was true that neither of them had the slightest idea about how to move the disk. Reassuring himself by thinking how they could jump onto some terrace even if it was a trap, he followed behind his partner.

After the pair boarded the disk through the break in the luxurious railings, Kirito peered at the glass pipe with a curious look as he informed the girl.

"Erm, then please bring us to the highest floor we can go."

"Very well. Then we shall now proceed to the eightieth floor, «Cloudtop Garden». Kindly stay within the boundaries of the handrails."

A response came back in no time at all and with yet another bow, the girl placed her two hands atop the pipe. She took in a breath of air—

"System call. Generate aerial element."

The sudden art ritual chant flustered Eugeo, interpreting it as an attack, but that didn't appear to be the case. After all, the aerial elements that appeared, gleaming green, were inside the transparent pipe. But he got another shock upon seeing their numbers. There were a whole ten of them—she must be a rather high ranking art user to generate this many elements in one go.

The girl pointed out her right thumb, index, and middle fingers among the ten slender fingers she had on the glass pipe and softly muttered.

"Burst element."

Three of the aerial elements shot out with a green flash in that moment, causing a growl to well up from below. The metallic disk ridden by three humans instantly began to ascend as though pulled along by an invisible hand.

"So that's it! So that's how it works, huh."

Eugeo finally understood the basis behind how the disk rose and fell with Kirito's apparently delighted voice. Aerial elements were released within

the glass pipe running through the disk, which allowed the weight of three humans and the disk itself to be lifted up by discharging the resultant explosive gust downwards.

It was a simple mechanism now that he understood it, but the disk's movement was smooth to the point of nearly not feeling anything. Aside from the pressure he somewhat felt at the start of the ascent, it slid through the air with hardly any jolting.

The fiftieth floor promptly disappeared into the distance below and Eugeo was once again made aware that this small disk could rise to the cathedral's eightieth floor, that is, a height high enough to touch the clouds. Wiping his sweaty palms on his trousers, he tightly gripped onto the railings.

Kirito by his side, however, had a calm expression on as though he had ridden something similar in the past, admiring the setup as he oohed and aahed, though his interest soon shifted from the disk to the human operating it and asked upon looking at the girl.

"How long have you been doing this job?"

The girl responded with a very slightly puzzled voice, her face still hidden.

"This will be the hundred and seventh year since this sacred task has been bestowed upon me."

"A hun..."

Forgetting even about the void below his feet, Eugeo widened his eyes. He haltingly questioned in Kirito's place.

"A-A hundred and seven years... you've been operating this disk that whole time!?"

"I haven't been operating it... the whole time. I do receive a meal break in the afternoon and of course, I am allowed to rest at night."

"E-Erm... that's not really what I..."

—No.

That was how it was. This girl must also have had her Life frozen like the integrity knights, and live atop this single metal disk for what could be said to be an eternity.

Eugeo believed that fate was far more cruel, more forsaken, and more bleak than even that of the integrity knights, who devoted their unlimited time to battle.

The metallic disk slowly but steadily ascended. The girl concealed all emotion below her lowered eyelashes, creating aerial elements anew whenever they were spent, and releasing them yet again. Eugeo wondered how many times had she repeated that verse, "burst", muttered with each cycle, but of course, it was easily beyond his imagination.

"You... what's your name?"

Kirito suddenly asked.

The girl inclined her head for the longest time so far, before replying in a murmur.

"My name... I cannot remember it. All of the dear sirs and madams have referred to me as «Elevating Operator». Elevating Operator... that is my name."

It seemed even Kirito had no response for this. Eugeo, who had inadvertently counted the passing terraces and was now over twenty, felt an urge to fill the silence pressing behind him and opened his mouth.

"...Hey... hey, we're here to defeat the important people of the Axiom Church. Those who charged you with this sacred task."

"I see."

That was all the girl replied with. But Eugeo continued with his words, probably without any particular goal in mind.

"If... the church cease to exist and you get freed from this sacred task, what will you do...?"

"...Freed...?"

After repeating that in an unsteady tone, the girl named Elevating Operator kept up her silence as they passed by another five terraces.

Having taken a look up, Eugeo realized a gray ceiling had appeared in their way unawares. That must be the base of the cathedral's eightieth floor. They were finally about to step foot into the true core of the Axiom Church.

"I... know nothing of the world aside from this elevating disk."

The girl suddenly spoke in faltering words.

"As such... I am unable to decide upon a new sacred task even at your insistence... however, if you meant it in the sense of something I wish to do..."

Her face that had been lowered this entire time raised and the girl gazed at the long and narrow windows on the wall at the right—at the clear northern skies that lay beyond them.

"...I would like to fly freely on this elevating disk... in those skies..."

The girl's eyes he finally saw now were a deep, deep indigo blue, much like the blue skies at the height of summer.

The instant the final aerial element twinkled out of existence, the disk reached the thirtieth terrace and gently came to a stop.

The elevating operator girl took her hands off the glass pipe, placed them together before her apron, and took a deep bow.

"Thank you for your patience, we have arrived at the eightieth floor, «Cloudtop Garden»."

"...Thanks."

Both Eugeo and Kirito lowered their heads and walked onto the terrace from the disk.

The girl lifted her head no more, and after another mild bow, she entrusted the disk's descent to the weakening aerial element. The gushing sound, like a cold wintry wind, immediately faded off into the distance and its form vanished into the depths of the blue darkness; that small steel world, confined for all of eternity.

Eugeo took a deep breath without realizing it.

"...I thought my last sacred task was the worst in the world when it came to being endless, but..."

After he murmured that, Kirito raised his eyebrows and glanced at him.

"So it had been enough of a blessing that I could retire after growing old and becoming unable to swing that axe; when I compare it to that girl's sacred task, it's just..."

"Cardinal said that freezing a person's Life from reducing naturally through art rituals is no protection against the soul's aging. That it would slowly encroach on one's memories and that person would eventually break."

Kirito, who replied in a depressed tone, swung his body with force, as though trying to sever that line of thought, and turned his back on the deep shaft.

"What the Axiom Church is doing is wrong. That's why we're here to defeat Administrator. But that's not the end to everything, Eugeo. The real challenges lie beyond that..."

"Eh...? Don't we just have to leave the rest to Cardinal-san from earlier if we defeat Administrator?"

Kirito moved his lips when Eugeo asked, as though he was about to say something, but an uncertainty unlike his usual decisive self appeared in his black eyes and he ended up averting his face.

"Kirito...?"

"...No, let's talk more about that after we recover Alice. This isn't any time to be thinking about unnecessary stuff."

"That's... true, but still."

Kirito began to walk across the terrace at a brisk pace, as though escaping from the look emanating from Eugeo as he tilted his head. Eugeo chased after him with an inexplicable emotion, but a feeling of tension welling from the depths of his body swept away his flimsy doubts in the blink of an eye after the huge doors towering at the end of the short terrace entered their view.

Seeing how five integrity knights had gathered on the fiftieth floor, the person coordinating the countermeasures against intruders—likely the Chief Elder person Fanatio had mentioned had intended to stop the two of them there by all means. The fact that they had actually repelled the knights' fierce assault and achieved victory somehow must have been close to a miracle.

Them breaking through that defensive line and climbing up this close to the highest floor was sure to have that Chief Elder finally sending out those with high battle potential without reserve. The «Knight Commander» along with all of the remaining integrity knights, as well as the high ranking sacred art users, those priests and ascetics, might be lying in wait beyond this door, for example—such a thing was relatively possible.

But as long as there is no other path, we can do nothing but break through any barrier standing before us from the front.

We can do it. With both Kirito and me here.

Eugeo firmly exchanged looks with his partner, standing at his side, and they nodded together. Reaching out with their hands simultaneously, they placed their palms on the left and right doors respectively and energetically pushed them.

The stone doors began slowly opening to the left and right with a leaden noise.

"....."

His five senses absorbed the colors spreading out before his eyes, the babble of water, and a fragrant scent at that moment, causing a brief dizziness.

There was no mistake that they were inside the tower. The same white marble as the floors below could be seen at the far end.

However, the spacious floor wasn't covered in stone like how it had been thus far. Instead, a thick, cushy lawn was thriving there. Sacred flowers of various colors, apparently the source of the scent, were in full bloom here and there on the lawn.

What astonished him further was a small, pure stream flowing a short distance away, its water surface glittering with light. A slender brick path

stretched out from the door the pair stood at, cutting through the lawn, and continued on after a wooden bridge spanning over the small stream.

A small hill appeared to be beyond the stream. The path snaked up over the inclining ground with an abundance of blooming flowers. Having followed the path with his sight, Eugeo noticed a single tree growing at the crown of the hill.

It wasn't that large as a tree. He could spot dark-green leaves and small, orange flowers in the shape of a cross on the thin branches. Solus's light, streaming in from the window on the wall near the ceiling far above, precisely cast onto the tree and its countless flowers sparkled as if they were made of gold.

Its glassy, thin trunk also bathed in the sunlight and shone—and at its base, too, was a remarkably dazzling golden splendor—

"Ah....."

Eugeo was unaware of the quiet sound that escaped from his own mouth.

Each and every thought he had came to a standstill the instant he saw that girl sitting against the tree trunk with her eyelids closed.

As if she was a phantasm brought about by the sunlight beautifully streaming through the tree, all of the girl's form was bathed in golden light. The magnificent armor covering her upper body and arms was white with golden embellishments, her long skirt was pure white as well, with golden thread embroidered onto the fabric, and even her polished, white leather boots reflected an unblemished brilliance received from the sunlight streaming in.

However, what sparkled brightest was her plentiful, sinuous, long hair. The straight hair, that was like molten gold, drew a perfect arc as it flowed to her waist from her petite head, producing a cascade of sublime light.

A radiance he saw practically everyday, a long time ago in the past. He knew neither its value nor its transience, pulling on that hair in jest and tying twigs into it.

That golden brilliance, a representation of friendship, aspiration, and a nebulous affection, had transformed within just a single day, gaining no connotations but that of Eugeo's weakness, ugliness, and cowardice. And

that glimmer he should have never been able to see again was now within his reach once more.

"Ah... Ali... ce..."

Without even noticing the hoarse voice spilling out from his own mouth, Eugeo tottered forward.

He raggedly followed the brick path. Neither the refreshing scent of the sacred flowers nor the soothing sound of the water registered in Eugeo's awareness any longer. Only the heat from his sweaty hand tightly clenched onto his coat breast and the dagger that seemed to pulse within the fabric secured Eugeo to this world.

Crossing the bridge spanning over the small stream, drawing near the slope. Already less than twenty mel to go until the crown of the hill.

When he looked up, he could clearly see the girl's face slightly turned downwards. No emotion at all showed on her white, practically translucent skin. She merely remained silent with her eyes shut, her mind seemingly drifting among the sunlight's warmth and the flowers' scent.

—Is she asleep?

If I get closer like this and just stab the dagger a little into those fingers interlocked above her lap... would that be the end to everything?

It was when that thought flashed into Eugeo's mind.

Alice's right hand rose without a sound and Eugeo's heart pounded as his feet stopped.

Her charming lips moved and a nostalgic voice reached his ears.

"Allow me a little more time. It has been a while since we had such good weather, so I would like to let this child bask in the sunlight further."

Her eyelids, framed by her golden eyelashes, gently lifted up.

The pair of eyes colored blue, matchless in the world, gazed straight into Eugeo's.

Eugeo saw a vision of Alice's gaze softening, a smile forming on her lips.

However, the blue in her lucid eyes was not the gentle color of the sky it once was. It was the color of ice that had remained frozen for ten thousand

years, unmelting regardless of how much sunlight it bathed in. Impaled by a gaze that regarded the intruders coldly, Eugeo could not move his legs.

As expected, a fight was unavoidable.

Even if she had lost her memories, he would have to draw his sword towards that girl, who was no doubt Alice Schuberg from Rulid. To return her to how she was. No matter how difficult he might find the battle to accept.

His body had felt Integrity Knight Alice Synthesis Thirty's true strength two days ago, when his cheek had been struck by her scabbard. Eugeo might have been taken unaware by that single hit, but he hadn't even been able to follow it with his eyes. It would prove to be next to impossible to suppress a swordsman of such skill without suffering heavy injuries, wouldn't it?

She was no opponent to go easy on.

—Still, could I actually sever even a single strand of that golden hair?

Seeing as I can't even take another step forward, let alone draw my sword.

Kirito spoke from behind Eugeo, standing still from the sudden conflict, his words clear despite being somewhat hoarse.

"You aren't fighting here, Eugeo. Think only about properly stabbing Cardinal's dagger into Alice. I'll stop her attacks for you even at the cost of my own life."

"Bu... but."

"There's no other way, the situation will get worse the more we drag out the battle. I'll take Alice's first attack on instead of dodging and restrain her like that, so use that dagger right away. Got it?"

"....."

He firmly bit his lips. Ultimately, he had made Kirito the one who bled in both the battle against Deusolbert and the battle against Fanatio. Despite how this reckless plan of challenging the Axiom Church had originally stemmed from nothing more than Eugeo's personal agenda.

"...Sorry."

When he muttered with shame, Kirito replied in a tone a little closer to his usual.

"You don't have to apologize; I'll have you pay it all back several times over soon enough. ...Still, putting that aside..."

"...? What's the matter?"

"No... from what I can see, she doesn't look like she's armed. Besides... who was she talking about when she said, 'this child'...?"

Guided, he focused his eyes on Alice, still sitting atop the hill. Her eyelids were once again closed and slightly downcast; he looked at her waist, the golden scabbard that had been suspended there when they had first encountered her at the Sword Mastery Academy certainly wasn't there now.

"Maybe she leaves her sword behind when she's resting or something like that... That would be a great help, though."

Muttering in a tone that showed his lack of belief in such a thing, Kirito brushed against his black sword's grip with his left hand.

"It's not nice towards Alice, but it's not like we can go along with her until she's done basking in the sun. Whether she has a sword or not, challenging her now should prevent her from chanting the full control art at least. Honestly, it's the best we could hope for if we can settle this without her using that."

"I guess you're right... my full control art doesn't use up that much of my sword's Life, so I believe I can still use it another two times today, though..."

"That'll be helpful. That said, one more time's the limit on my side. And there should still be that Knight Commander guy after Alice. Well... let's go."

Kirito took a step forward with a small nod.

His mind made up, Eugeo followed behind.

Leaving the brick path snaking around the hill, they headed straight for the peak. Their footsteps on the lawn resonated.

Alice softly stood when the pair had climbed halfway up the hill. Her glacial eyes that revealed not even a single shred of emotion stared down at the pair beyond her languorous eyelids.

As though her glance had cast some sort of art ritual, his two feet grew heavy in that instant. Despite how it was obvious that no sword belt could be seen on Alice, Eugeo felt his feet refuse to approach the girl any further. Was fear carved into his body after just a single blow to his cheek? But even if that was so, Kirito's gait also seemed to have lost its strength as well, as he walked in front, didn't it?

"...At long last, you've made your way this far, haven't you."

Alice's clear voice shook the air once again.

"I judged that having Eldrie alone on alert in the rose garden would be sufficient to cope with the both of you even on the off chance that you could escape from the underground jail. However, you have eliminated him and moreover, cut down Deusolbert-dono and even Fanatio-dono who possessed sacred instruments, stepping onto the grounds of this «Cloudtop Garden»."

Her arched eyebrows formed into a faint scowl. The voice from her cherry blossom lips had a hushed sorrowful ring to it.

"What exactly is it that bestowed such power onto the two of you? Why exactly would you come to impact the tranquility of the Human World so? Why do you not understand that each integrity knight injured would be a considerable setback towards the preparations against the forces of darkness?"

—It's for you, that's all there is to it.

Eugeo cried out in his heart. But he knew it would mean nothing to Integrity Knight Alice standing before his eyes even if he voiced it out. Firmly clenching his teeth, Eugeo merely put his all into moving his feet forward.

"As I thought—it appears I shall have to ask with my sword. Very well... if that is what the two of you wish."

Her words like a sigh, Alice placed her right hand on the tree trunk by her side as a support.

But she not holding onto a sword—

Eugeo thought that at nearly the same time Kirito blurted out a "no way".

Light flashed out in the next instant and the smallish tree growing on the hill's peak disintegrated.

"——!?"

Somewhat belatedly, a fragrance, rich in sweetness and vitality, lavishly drifted by, then vanished without a trace.

Before they knew it, Alice's right hand held onto a familiar long sword with its slender form. Not only the scabbard, but everything from the guard to the pommel were made from a dazzling gold. A cross-shaped flower design decorated the guard.

Eugeo couldn't immediately understand what had occurred.

The tree had vanished, and the sword had appeared. In other words, that tree had transformed into the sword? But Alice hadn't articulated any art rituals. Even if this was simply an illusionary art or some super high ranking sacred art for transmutation, it was impossible to carry it out without reciting the ritual's verses.

No. If that tree had changed its appearance based purely on Alice's mental image—that would, essentially mean—

Having arrived at a conclusion a moment quicker, Kirito let out a deep moan.

"Crap, this isn't good... could that sword already be in its full control state?"

Scowling down at the pair who stood upright, Alice raised the sword horizontally with both hands.

Jyaa! The blade, unsheathed with a screech, had a bright golden yellow aura distinctly more intense than even the scabbard, radiantly glistening as it reflected Solus's light.

Kirito launched a savage assault a moment after. It was unclear what kind of power Alice's sword wielded, but he judged it likely that it would be best to bring it into a close-range fight before the control art was activated. Fiercely tearing up the green grass, he climbed eighty percent of the hill in a mere ten steps.

While gripping onto the chain at his chest, Eugeo frantically chased after his partner as well. Kirito seemed to have no intention of drawing his sword. It appeared he intended to stop Alice's first attack with his body as he had said. Even if that sealed her movement, it would hardly last for long. Thus, Eugeo definitely had to fulfill his role of stabbing her with the dagger without letting the chance escape.

Alice's expression didn't change one bit even while looking at the approaching black-clothed swordsman. With a motion that appeared carefree, she lightly brandished the sword in her right hand.

Kirito had yet to enter slashing range. It was therefore likely to be a far-range offensive art like Deusolbert's or Fanatio's. If that was the case, even if the initial attack stops Kirito's advance, Eugeo should still be able to get within range to stab her with the dagger by using that interval.

Settling his thoughts in an instant, Eugeo changed his approach to a different angle from Kirito's and kept running.

Alice's right hand softly swung forward.

The golden blade—vanished.

"!?"

To be accurate, it didn't vanish. It would be more accurate to say that it dispersed. The sword split into hundreds or thousands of flakes and assailed Kirito as a golden tempest.

"Guah!!"

Engulfed in an immeasurable shimmer, Kirito was knocked down, rendered immobile, with a groan.

Making full use of the opportunity contrived by his partner, Eugeo clenched his teeth and ran forward.

However, the golden wind that attacked Kirito didn't just stop there. It caused a noise like a chilly gale and turned to the left in midair, sweeping at Eugeo from the side.

He could hardly stay on his feet after such an impact. As though he was sent flying by a giant's palm, Eugeo collapsed onto the right as well.

Each flake, measuring less than a cen long, was of an absurd weight. Thrown onto the lawn, Eugeo experienced a burning pain over his entire left arm that had shielded his face the instant the golden zephyr assailed him and desperately held down his desire to scream and writhe.

The countless golden flakes, that had stopped the pair's assault so easily, drew an arc as they whirled and returned to Alice's side. However, they didn't turn back into the form of a sword but stayed drifting around the knight.

On closer examination, all of the small flakes were crosses formed by even smaller diamond shapes joined together. They were the same as the design on the guard—which meant they were the same shape as the flowers of that tree growing on the hill.

"—Are you mocking me? How could you even run towards me without drawing your sword?"

Alice rebuked them quietly without expressing even a speck of emotion as always.

"The attack earlier was meant to serve as a warning. However, the next will wipe out all of your Life. Show me all you have got; for the sake of all the knights the two of you have defeated thus far as well."

She went—easy?

Despite that absurd power...?

Within Eugeo's sight as he shivered from the depths of his heart, the innumerous golden flowers made a loud "jyakii" noise in tandem. When he looked harder, he saw the tips of the four petals, which have been smooth and rounded thus far, now tapered into a point sharper than a slender sword's tip. He wouldn't get away with just collapsing like earlier if he was struck by such a thing. His skin would be torn apart and it would probably even slice through his bones.

A profound dread transmuted itself into cold water and forced its way into Eugeo, numbing his limbs.

Even if there was only one of those golden flowers by itself, his Life would swiftly decrease if it cut through his vitals. And yet the flakes glistening around Alice now, like a magnificent shower of blossoms, numbered over two or three hundred. It would be impossible to deflect them all with a

sword and even with that said, it was also next to impossible to dodge that storm of flowers capable of high-speed and unrestrained movement in the air. In other words, Alice's full control art was unbelievably complete and also almighty—

Yes, it was unbelievable.

The armament full control art with sacred instruments was certainly a powerful skill, but still, there were limits. This art's true nature is converting the «memories» possessed by the origins of the weapons, that is, whether it was hot, cold, hard, fast, and such, into an offensive ability and it couldn't help but deteriorate in other aspects, the more it specialized in one particular area.

Like Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio's full control art was repelled by a small mirror that Kirito created, as a result of specializing too much in piercing a single point with a concentrated light ray.

It was unknown what sort of existence that small tree once was that seemed to be the origin of Alice's sacred instrument, but if the power within it was divided so small, into such great numbers—that is, if it pursued only accuracy, each petal ought to have lost much more of their might. No matter how Eugeo thought about it, having one flake that wasn't even a cen long possess the clout of a giant's fist, as he had experienced with his own body, defied that theory.

If it could accomplish such a phenomenon, that slender tree that bloomed with orange flowers must have been given an ultra-high priority, surpassing even the origin of Kirito's sword, the «demonic tree», Gigas Cedar...

Kirito who had collapsed in front, to the left, seemed to have also thought of the same matter as Eugeo in an instant, as his raised side profile was pale with shock and fear.

However, he, who knew not the meaning of giving up, glanced at Eugeo with those eyes that retained their glint and moved his lips silently.

«Chant». —Get started on it.

Indeed, it was no longer possible to break through that storm of petals from the front. Hence, there was no choice but to shackle its master with the Blue Rose Sword's full control art. Alice had flourished the sword which had only the grip remaining in tune with the petals' movements earlier. In

other words, that would mean the flower cloud wasn't manipulated entirely by its master's will.

Still unseemly knocked down, Eugeo gently brushed his left hand against the Blue Rose Sword's grip and began chanting the full control art at a volume that was practically inaudible. There was nothing more that could be done if Alice noticed and attacked, but Kirito should do something about that.

As he predicted, Kirito got up in an exaggerated motion, as Eugeo started the chant, and shouted in a tense voice.

"I wish to apologize for my disrespectful conduct towards the honorable integrity knight! I, Swordsman-in-training Kirito, would like to formally request anew, for a duel using ordinary swords with Integrity Knight Alice!"

After hitting his chest with his right fist and taking a bow, he held onto the sword at the left of his waist by its grip. The jet-black blade drew out with a loud and shrill "jyari" and was raised up high as though it was trying to split the golden light covering the knight into two.

Alice gazed hard at the black-clothed swordsman with those blue eyes that felt as though they could see through everything and replied after a single blink.

"—Very well, I shall test how deeply embedded your wicked hearts lie through swordsmanship."

She gently swung the grip in her right hand. And with that, the countless golden flowers swirling around whirled towards Alice's hand with the sound of flowing waves, leaving few gaps as they aligned themselves in front of the grasped handle. A metallic "jyakin" rang out and the flakes combined, returning to its form as a golden long sword.

Facing Alice, who positioned the sword in a middle stance with graceful motions and began to advance like that, was Kirito, who prepared his sword in a lower stance; he then called out to her once again.

"One of us will inevitably fall after an exchange of swords, so I implore you to tell me one thing beforehand. I believe that tree atop the hill earlier was your sacred instrument's form in bygone times, but why does such a small tree possess such power?"

It was obviously a question for buying time, but Kirito truly wanted to know the mystery behind the golden sword's full control art, probably. Of course, Eugeo was highly intrigued as well. He strained his ears while continuing the chant.

Alice came to a standstill after taking three steps forward. She kept her silence for a while, and then moved her lips in slight motions.

"There is no purpose in telling the two of you with your imminent deaths, but... I suppose it could serve as a diversion on your way to the Celestial World. My sacred instrument is named, «Fragrant Olive Sword». As its name implies, it was once a fragrant olive tree with no irregular aspects to it at all."

The fragrant olive was a small-sized tree that produces small orange-colored flowers in the autumn. It rarely grew naturally in the vicinity near Rulid, but now that she mentioned it, he had seen it countless times in the capital. It couldn't be said to be of a rare variety, like the Gigas Cedar of which only one existed in the world.

"Yes, it was merely a small tree as you've said. Except it was the only one to have lasted that long. —This place the Central Cathedral is built on now was the «Starting Land» bestowed upon the humans by the Goddess of Creation Stacia in the long-passed ancient times. A beautiful spring surged forth from the heart of that small village and a single fragrant olive grew on its bank... or so the first chapter says in the records of creation. That very tree was the original form of my sword. I hope you understand; this Fragrant Olive Sword is the oldest existence among all things of nature in the Human World."

"Wh... what did you..."

In comparison to the astonished Kirito, Alice continued constructing her words together without emotion.

"This sword is the reincarnated form of a tree given life by the goddess. Its attribute is «eternal immortality». Even one of those fluttering petals could split a rock it touched or break the ground... as you have tasted with your own body earlier. Do you understand what exactly you've been pointing your blade at?"

"...Yeah, I definitely get it now."

Kirito spoke with his persistently formal speech cast off.

"I see, it's the first immortal object set down by the goddess... so that's it, huh. Geez, the things coming at us are getting more and more ridiculous... even so, it's not like I can continue being all awestruck."

Kirito slowly swung the black sword, probably much inferior to the Fragrant Olive Sword even if they possess the same type of origin, into an upper stance and cried out.

"Now then, Integrity Knight Alice... let's start our match again!"

The air shook as the black-clothed swordsman kicked off the ground. He charged forward at Alice, standing on top of the hill, at a velocity that made it hard to believe he was moving uphill.

Regardless of how ridiculous Alice's sword was, Kirito must be thinking that he could gain the advantage if he brings out a consecutive hit skill in close-range combat. Fanatio could deal with the high-speed consecutive attacks in the earlier battle because she had learnt them through her personal circumstances; she should be an exception among the integrity knights.

As Kirito and Eugeo predicted, Alice obediently raised her sword overhead against Kirito's downwards slash. She wouldn't be able to guard her middle when the downwards slash connects to a middle one with her speed.

The sword Kirito swung down turned into a bolt of black lightning and collided with the Fragrant Olive Sword, throwing off bluish-white sparks.

However, it did not immediately continue into that theoretical second hit.

After all, compared to how Alice's sword had barely moved, Kirito, the one on the offensive, was heavily repelled backwards like he had hit a large rock with a twig, destroying his stance.

"Uoah..."

Turning towards Kirito who had lost his balance on the slanted surface and staggered for two, three steps, Alice approached with footwork as smooth as a flowing stream.

Even the fingers on her outstretched left hand were pointing out. Her body was extended wide, her golden sword raised straight behind. It was a traditional style that couldn't be said to be fit for actual combat unlike the Aincrad style, but her appearance when coupled with her flowing golden hair and fluttering skirt was sublime like a framed painting.

"Eeeh!"

The sword drew a semi-circle as it launched an attack alongside that shrill and clear scream. The speed was frightening. But those movements were far too exaggerated.

Having recovered his stance, Kirito had enough time spare to place his sword at his left.

Gakaan! The two swords collided with a loud noise.

The one to spin like a top while getting blown away this time was once again Kirito. Thrusting his hand onto the grass, he narrowly avoided falling down while sliding down to the base of the hill.

At this stage, Eugeo, too, understood what was occurring before his eyes at last.

The weight behind their individual hits were on completely different levels.

Kirito had the black sword, possessing a priority that could be considered high among most sacred instrument, and the consecutive hit skills of the Aincrad style, that drove away numerous integrity knights, but the Fragrant Olive Sword that Alice carried was probably hiding a weight several times that of the black sword within itself. It was a difficult enough task to stop its attack, let alone repel it, when it was swung at such a speed.

No, that wouldn't be the end of it. As had been made clear by the initial conflict, Kirito was the one to get repulsed even when on the offensive. This wouldn't be much of a fight.

Kirito seemed to have realized that fact and quickly stood up, though he did take several more steps down with terrified expression. Alice chased behind as though she was gliding.

The ensuing battle could be said to be Kirito's first battle in these two years that had developed so one-sidedly.

Alice delivered slash after slash with the grace of a dancer. Kirito tried his best to take them on but got unsightly blown away each time. He would have chances at a counterattack if he could dodge purely by shifting his body, but Alice's sword was dreadfully quick with superb aim despite its hefty size, making it extremely hard to evade them cleanly.

Finished with the art ritual chant even while trembling with fear, Eugeo chased after the pair who continued to move about. With things having proceeded this far, he had no choice but to activate the armament full control art while Kirito somehow took on the attacks.

After merely five exchanges of offense and defense which took next to no time, Kirito had already been driven to the western wall. Behind him was solid marble with all routes of escape cut off.

Pointing her sword at the enemy, now stuck in a predicament, Alice spoke with a refreshing expression.

"I see. —You are the second to have endured my attacks this long. It seems you have climbed this tower with a fair level of resolve and faith. However... it is not at all enough to sway the church. As I thought, I cannot allow the two of you to upset the order of the Human World."

The golden knight's refined standing posture showed no opening. She could probably instantly deal with Eugeo activating the art ritual, even if it was behind her.

Kirito—say something. A short moment's fine, make her let her guard down.

Eugeo prayed with all he had as he ran, but his partner merely leaned his back against the marble wall, his two eyes glittering, and made no further attempt to speak even a single word.

"Well then—prepare yourself."

The Fragrant Olive Sword readily traced an arc as it pointed at the sky, wielded vertically.

A fleeting silence.

Tearing through the air, the golden light rushed on.

His two eyes opened to their limits, Kirito moved his right hand so fast it became a blur.

A shrill, metallic noise. A streak of sparks.

He didn't take it on, but let it flow past. The swords made contact at the lowest possible angle and Alice's absurdly heavy attack was averted by the slightest margin.

What the Fragrant Olive Sword pierced through with a dull impact was—a cen left of Kirito's head, the smooth marble wall. The black hair severed scattered into the air and vanished.

Kirito immediately leapt at Alice. He pinned down the knight's right hand with his left and entwined her left arm with his right. She hadn't quivered even once until now, but Alice's cheeks still twitched at that all the same.

—Now.

"Enhance armament!!"

Eugeo thrust the Blue Rose Sword into the lawn at his feet with that scream.

His surroundings froze white in just an instant. A wave of frost spread forth with impetuous strength, swallowing Kirito and Alice roughly ten mel away.

Countless ice tendrils immediately reached out from the pair's feet all at once. All of them became clear, blue shackles as they coiled and twined about the connected pair's figures. Kirito's black clothes and Alice's white armor were discernibly being hidden away by a thick layer of ice.

Kirito—Alice, forgive me!

Crying out in his heart, Eugeo continued creating the ice tendrils. It was doubtful any amount of shackles would suffice with Integrity Knight Alice as the target.

The tendrils that twined over them one after another with stiff noises soon changed into a single thick icicle.

The transparent pillar with its multiple layers, resembling crystal ore, quietly glittered with both swordsmen trapped within it. All that stuck outside was Alice's right hand and the Fragrant Olive Sword held in it, pierced into the wall. Alice's expression, showing slight surprise, and Kirito's expression, resolved for death, remained still within the blue ice.

Everything would end by stabbing the dagger into that arm.

Eugeo separated his hand from the Blue Rose Sword and stood up. Letting go of the sword would release the full control art, but the thick icicle should take tens of minutes to melt naturally. Firmly gripping the dagger in his pocket with his right hand, he took one, two steps forward—

He took the third step as golden light exploded.

"Ah....."

Alice's sword, stabbed into the wall, split into countless flower petals in the frightened Eugeo's vision.

Zaa... That grim chord resonated as the golden storm of flowers engulfed the icicle.

Eugeo could do nothing but watch in a daze as the small, cross blades swirled like a tornado, quickly shaving the ice away. Eugeo's Life would likely be extinguished if he dove straight into that vortex, before taking even a single step forward.

Shaving the ice away, the storm of flowers soared up in the air after only a thin layer remained.

The icicle crumbled with a short-lived noise immediately after.

Hurling Kirito, still holding on, towards Eugeo with her left hand, Alice spoke with a tone that remained indifferent while shaking off the ice flakes clinging onto her hair.

"—Did the two of you not request for a contest of skill with the sword? It served as fair bit of amusement, but... it was apparent that mere ice had no chance of restraining my flowers. Your turn will come next, so do behave yourself and wait."

When she lightly stretched her right hand out, the flower petals drifting above instantly gathered and returned to its original sword—

"Enhance armament!!"

Kirito was the one who screamed.

No one knew when he had finished chanting the full control art, but strands of darkness streaked out from the black sword held in his two hands.

His aim was not Alice herself—

It was the Fragrant Olive Sword right before it could combine together.

"Eh...!"

Alice let out a shocked voice for the first time.

The torrent of darkness scattered the countless flower petals and threw them out of control.

Guaaah! A thundering roar split his ears as the tempest, a blend of pitch-black and gold, violently blew. They interweaved, swirled together, and slammed into the marble wall behind Alice.

"Eugeo——!!"

Kirito's scream.

Right. This was, definitely, the last chance.

Eugeo pulled the dagger from his bosom and kicked off the ground.

Just eight mel to Alice.

Seven mel.

Six mel.

Then. Something beyond everyone's expectations occurred.

The abnormally powerful torrent brought forth by fusing the full control arts from both sacred instruments struck the Central Cathedral's wall and a myriad of cracks spread out over its entire length.

Along with a roar that seemed to shake even the Celestial World, the massive marble—those white walls, that were thought to be unbreakable like the «immortal walls», collapsed.

Blocks of stone were thrown outside and the hole created rapidly widened before his eyes.

Eugeo stared at the blue skies and the white sea of clouds peeking in from beyond, flabbergasted.

A sudden, violent gust knocked into Eugeo from the back and he was forced onto the grass. The air within the tower was being sucked out through the hole in the wall. The pair right next to the hole could do naught to resist that deluge of air.

The sight of the black-clothed swordsman and the golden knight entangled with each other being hurled out of the tower burnt itself into Eugeo's eyes.

"Uwaaaaah!!"

While screaming, Eugeo crept towards the hole in the wall.

What can I do—make a rope with sacred arts—no, I'll use ice from the Blue Rose Sword to save those—

He wasn't given the time to put those thoughts into action.

The stones making up the marble wall that should have fallen outside gathered together as though time had been rewound and started to rejoin together across the entire length of the wall.

Clung, clung, those dull noises rang out each time the hole contracted—

"Aaaaaah!!"

And snugly closed up before Eugeo's eyes, a scream escaping from him while he rushed over as quickly as he could, as though nothing had actually happened.

He feverishly hammered with his fists. Twice; thrice.

Even after his skin broke and his blood sprayed out, the renewed wall remained unblemished, not showing a single sign of damage.

"Kirito——!! Alice———!!"

The white and glassy marble cruelly dismissed Eugeo's screams.

(to be continued)

Afterword

Thank you very much for reading Sword Art Online 12, 'Alicization Rising'. The Alicization arc has progressed along 'Beginning', 'Running', and 'Turning', getting to the fourth volume before I knew it and the end should be getting within sight, but... it feels like Kirito-san and Eugeo-san have been going up the whole time, doesn't it... Well, you see, the Central Cathedral is a hundred-story building like Aincrad, so it must be horrible to climb up, definitely. They should reach the highest floor in the next volume, so I would be glad if you could accompany them as they climb the stairs for a little longer!

Of course, the 'Rising' subtitle was appended with the connotation of 'ascending', but when talking about stairs, it seems the right term would be go up, rather than rise. Please don't get it wrong if it comes out in your sacred tongue, or rather, English tests. go up the stairs means to 'go up the stairs'!

The 1st volume was published in April 2009, so the 12th volume's release date in April 2013, would mean the SAO series has been going on for four whole years. In the story, if we take the beginning to be when SAO started its service in November 2022, then as the Alicization Arc is in June 2026, roughly three years and seven months have passed, haven't they. (Kirito did spend another two years in the Underworld, though...)

I am of the mind that Kirito, as well as Asuna and the rest, have gone through various experiences both in the real world and the virtual world throughout that time span and developed further, but on the other hand, I draw a complete blank when I think about how I, the author, have changed. Are both my own self and my living conditions due to Administrator-sama?! They have stayed so utterly constant that I am conversely surprised. Behold, not even the notebook PC I have used for writing has changed! (the paint on the keyboard has been worn out from the abuse, though)

I wonder if this essentially means that I find all sorts of change scary and troublesome. In actual fact, the bother of adapting to a different environment overpowered my desire to switch to a new PC and the course I ride on my bicycle each week has stayed the same down to those turns I take... But I feel that my mind's idea output will be reduced if I don't come into contact with new worlds every now and then, so I hope to make this year, a year of various changes. First will be to get a brand-new notebook

PC... I want to do that, but pasting on the protective film is such a bother.....

To the editors-in-charge who have taken care of me for so long, Miki-san and Tsuchiya-san, and the one who has drawn the illustrations with such spirit each time even throughout that relentless schedule, abec-san, and also all of the readers who have accompanied me on the SAO series thus far, I hope for your support in the fifth year as well!

A Certain Day in February, 2013 Kawahara Reki

References

1. ↑ Previously translated as "Taboo Breaking Index".
2. ↑ "absolutely loyal" – She didn't actually say that phrase anywhere here, but she did in the web novel, so this is probably an editing error on the LN version.
3. ↑ "connections between people" – Human is "人間" in Japanese, with "人" being "person" and "間" being "relationship".
4. ↑ Armor Names – Literally "Thousand Thunder Armor" or "Rumbling Mountain Kacchu". Kacchu is a set of traditional Japanese armor. Like those the samurai wear, with the silly helmets.
5. ↑ "bow broken, arrows spent" – This is a saying in Japan that means, "It's all over". The original sentence was "This is truly what it meant to have one's bow broken and arrows spent", a literal allusion to the saying.
6. ↑ "I'm" – She first uses "atashi", then changes it to "watashi". "atashi" is considered a more childish way to refer to oneself.

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Credits

Story : Reki Kawahara
Illustrator : abec

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